

**Children of the Revolution:  
Bolan, Bowie and the Carnavalesque**

Alison Blair

A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Master of Arts

At the University of Otago  
2016

## **Abstract**

David Bowie and Marc Bolan were two glam rock stars who, in the 1970s, presented audiences with carnivalesque 'alternatives' to everyday reality. As a time of crisis and transformation, the 1970s in Britain has been characterised as a period of particularly difficult socio-economic turmoil, in a still relatively conservative society – particularly in relation to conventional norms of identity, 'authenticity', gender and sexuality. Bolan and Bowie, through their performance personae and narrative spaces, provided both a form of 'escape' from the lived experience of these socio-economic difficulties, and a counter-hegemonic alternative to these aforementioned norms. That is, their 'alternate identities' challenged conventional norms of authenticity and of identity itself, and their 'alternate sexualities' presented audiences with counter-hegemonic representations of gender and sexuality. Moreover, their 'alternate realities' were carnivalesque, Otherworldly narrative spaces that their alternate identities inhabited, providing an escape from the difficulties of life in 1970s Britain. In this thesis, I explore these various 'alternatives' through a Bakhtinian framework in order to discuss the ways that they represented, in Bakhtin's terms, a carnivalesque 'second life of the people' – a social safety valve and escape from these increasingly difficult socio-economic conditions. In chapter one, I place Bolan and Bowie within the context of 1970s Britain, and within the context of the glam rock genre. I explore the ways that glam has been framed as either reactionary or radical, and I align my own research with the latter approach. In chapter two, I discuss the ways that Bolan and Bowie adopted the 'carnival mask', presenting their counter-hegemonic 'identities', and in chapter three I explore their non-

normative representations of gender and sexuality in terms of Bakhtin's 'world upside down' and the 'lower bodily stratum'. In chapter four, I discuss the 'Otherworlds' that these 'identities' inhabited – carnivalesque spaces – which inverted conventional hierarchies and presented a radical, utopian critique of British contemporary life under capitalism.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisors Dr. Rosemary Overell and Dr. Brett Nicholls for their guidance and support, and to Dr. Paul Ramaeker for his valuable contribution in the early stages of my research. I am also thankful to the following people who supported and encouraged me, or contributed in some way to the completion of this thesis: Pat Cumming, Tony McSoriley, Anita Cumming, and Clive Cumming; my husband Matthew Blair and the extended Blair and Norton families; Dr. Lachy Paterson and Associate Professor Angela Wanhalla; Dr. Rochelle Simmons and Dr. Mark Maguire; Dr. Ian Chapman and all of the Bowie scholars who I met at the *Stardom and Celebrity of David Bowie* symposium; postgraduate students and staff of the Department of Media, Film and Communication; my former colleagues in the Department of English and Linguistics, and in the Development and Alumni Relations Office, as well as my friends in the Department of Music at the University of Otago. Special thanks to Dr. Garth Cartwright for the diligent proof-reading, and to Jonny Clifford and Matthew Scott for the open-ended book loans. Thank you also to Steve Harley and Rachel Cameron, and to the New Zealand Federation of Graduate Women. Finally, thank you to David Bowie and Marc Bolan, who this was all about in the first place.

Marc Bolan 1947-1977

David Bowie 1947-2016

“There’s a starman waiting in the sky...”

## Table of contents

### PREFACE

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iii</b>

### Chapter One

<b>Introduction: Glam and the 1970s</b>	<b>1</b>
Cultural Context: Britain in the 1970s	3
‘Children of the Revolution’: Introducing Glam	10
High Glam/Low Glam	12
Theoretical Responses to Glam	15
Glam as Reactionary	15
Glam as Radical	17
<b>The Carnavalesque: Introduction and Approaches</b>	<b>27</b>
The Carnavalesque as Reactionary	29
The Carnavalesque as Radical	29

### Chapter Two

<b>‘Alternate Personae’: Bolan, Bowie and the Carnival Mask</b>	<b>35</b>
The Carnival Mask, Identity and ‘Authenticity’	35
Challenging ‘Authenticity’: Ephemeral Identities	37
The ‘Fantastical Other’: Aliens, Magicians, and Transgressive Otherness	42
‘Otherness’ as a Challenge to Authenticity and as ‘Social Safety Valve’	43
Otherness as a Challenge to Heteronormativity	50

### Chapter Three

<b>‘Alternate Sexualities’: Bolan, Bowie and Gender and Sexuality</b>	<b>55</b>
Glam, Gender and Sexuality	58
The ‘World Upside Down’ and the Lower Bodily Stratum	60
Bolan’s Gender Ambiguity and Heterosexual ‘Performance’	64
Bowie’s Gender and Sexual Ambiguity	70

<b>Chapter Four</b>	
<b>'Alternate Realities': Bolan and Bowie's Carnavalesque Otherworlds</b>	<b>77</b>
Otherworlds in 1970s Popular Media	80
Bolan's Alternate Reality: 'Mystic Sci Fi' Utopia	81
Bowie's Alternate Reality: Near-Future Sci Fi Dystopia	95
<b>Chapter Five</b>	
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>108</b>

## Chapter One

### Introduction: Glam and the 1970s

Writing in 1998, film director Todd Haynes noted that during his research for the film *Velvet Goldmine*, there were no full-length books in print about glam rock. There was, at that stage, “nothing to single it out as a comprehensive cultural phenomenon”.<sup>1</sup> This is no longer the case, as interest in the 1970s and in glam rock has steadily grown in recent years, both in academia and in the popular imagination. With its glitter, glamour and showmanship, it has been easy, and an oversimplification of the genre, to view the glam explosion of the 1970s as an anomaly of sorts, an unexpected diversion, and leave it at that. However, no text, no genre, exists in isolation, and is always the outcome or reflection of a specific set of circumstances, able to tell us more about its cultural context, more about its audience, and more about itself. I position my own research on Marc Bolan and David Bowie within a growing body of work on both the 1970s and on glam rock, as well as within the relatively new field of scholarly work on Bowie himself. I aim to discuss 1970s British glam as a response to its social and political context, and in doing so, I will discuss the body of work of Bolan and Bowie, the genre’s two most pivotal figures, as having a critical, counter-hegemonic function in terms of their presentation of alternate personae, alternate sexualities, and alternative realities. These ‘alternatives’ act as expressions of the carnivalesque as outlined by Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly the concept of the social ‘safety valve’, and the idea of mask as a form of resistance. I argue therefore, that glam emerged not merely as a new form of rock music, or as a new trend in fashion (although it was indeed both), but primarily as a response to British economic and political difficulty, and the effect of that difficulty upon an increasingly disenfranchised society. Rather than the explicit, visceral challenge that we would see towards the end of the 1970s in the form of punk rock, glam’s inherent response was a form of escapism, imagining futuristic scenarios and incorporating ‘characters’ drawn from science fiction (and in the case of Bolan, also hearkening back to an idyllic, if imaginary, past).

---

<sup>1</sup> Barney Hoskyns, *Glam!: Bowie, Bolan and the Glitter Rock Revolution* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), xi.

Furthermore, this form of escapism also coalesced around Bolan and Bowie's respective personae as 'otherworldly' rock stars. In relation to this, I will discuss how Bolan and Bowie constructed these personae through their bodies of work, and further to this, the ways that these personae acted as expressions of the carnival mask – that is, the mask as a form of identity play in which participants wore masks representing various other persons or 'characters'. For both of these artists, their alternate personae or 'masks' took the form of costuming, makeup, first- and third-person narration within their song lyrics, and within the titles of their albums - Bowie's character of 'Ziggy Stardust' and Bolan's short-lived persona as 'Zinc Alloy' being key examples. Moreover, Bolan's primary form of identity play incorporated fantasy literature influences into the 'Marc Bolan persona' and exaggerated them to a fantastical degree. For both artists, these alternate personae, or masks, were not only counter-hegemonic alternatives to the present-day reality of 1970s Britain, but they also challenged conventional notions of 'authentic identity' and 'authenticity' itself – and I will return to this idea in the next chapter, particularly in terms of the ways that this aspect of Bolan and Bowie's personae challenged the music scene's *own* privileging of 'authenticity'.

Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* provides the conceptual framework of this thesis. Bakhtin delineates the functions of the medieval, pre-Lenten carnival, and one of these functions, aside from entertainment and festivity, was to overthrow social conventions, reversing power relations of class and gender, in what is known as 'the world upside-down'. In this manner, Bolan and Bowie's range of personae presented a counter-hegemonic challenge to conventional notions of gender and sexuality. Further to this, by drawing upon a diverse range of literary, musical and cultural sources in their stage performances, television appearances, sartorial choices, song lyrics, and music, Bolan and Bowie presented audiences with a cohesive fantasy image, providing, in Bakhtin's terms, a 'social safety valve' from the everyday reality of 1970s Britain. Bolan's utopian fantasy was mystical and literary, drawing inspiration from J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll, various forms of mythology, and science fiction. Bowie, on the other hand, presented himself as a serious-minded purveyor of futuristic performance art, drawing his inspiration from avant-garde theatre, dance, literature, cinema, art and philosophy.

Both artists, additionally, presented audiences with fantasy characters or personae that deliberately challenged conventional images of masculinity – and moreover, these personae inhabited ‘otherworldly’ realities, representing a further ‘escape’ from everyday contemporary life. In this introductory section, then, I will contextualise Bolan and Bowie’s work within the growing field of research into the cultural shifts and transitions of the 1970s, and in terms of the decade’s wider cultural output. I will also introduce and define glam rock in terms of its generic distinctions, key players, and key events, before moving on to discuss the theoretical approaches to glam. I will then delineate my theoretical framework, and consider the theoretical approaches to the carnivalesque.

### **Cultural Context: Britain in the 1970s**

Both Newland (2010) and Shail (2008) discuss British cinema of the 1970s in terms of “dystopian negativity”,<sup>2</sup> emphasising the need to re-evaluate the decade’s cultural output. The three main existing works in the wider field of British popular culture in the 1970s (Hunt, Forster and Harper, Moore-Gilbert), give similar reasons for the relative paucity of academic work in this area. Hunt (1998) argues that the popular perception of the 1970s as “the decade that taste forgot”,<sup>3</sup> that is, as a decade to be derided, has contributed to a sense that the 1970s cannot be taken seriously. The notion that the 1970s produced a slew of ‘low’ cultural forms such as bawdy television comedies and seedy pornographic films, then, is Hunt’s entry point into dialogue with the period. As such, he engages with the idea of ‘low culture’ in terms of what it reveals about 1970s British society, particularly in regards to attitudes toward sex, sexuality and gender. He discusses sitcoms such as *Man About the House*, the *Carry On* series of films, football, and pop music, including an overview of glam rock in relation to the notions of ‘authenticity’ and gender.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, Moore-Gilbert’s (1994) edited collection of essays is less focused on ‘pop culture’. Encompassing aspects of British cultural forms such as dance, theatre, poetry, critical theory, television, and music, this book’s

---

<sup>2</sup> Paul Newland, *Don't Look Now: British Cinema in the 1970s* (Bristol; Chicago: Intellect Ltd, 2010), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Shail, *Seventies British Cinema* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire England ; New York: British Film Institute, 2008), xii.

<sup>4</sup> Auslander (2009), whose work I also discuss here, picks up on this line of thought.

contributors discuss their chosen areas in relation to institutional developments and socio-cultural factors. In order to dispute the characterisation of the 1970s as a period of “cultural decline”,<sup>5</sup> the focus here is primarily on avant-garde and ‘high’ cultural forms. The exceptions to this are Whannel’s discussion of trends in television programming, and Harker’s exploration of chart-oriented pop music. Harker’s primary aim here is to challenge the critical discourses that privilege ‘rock’ as the predominant musical style of the 1970s. Citing Elton John as an example, he points out that many commercial artists of the 1970s are excluded from the ‘rock canon’, and as a result, have not been the subject of academic study. It is from this point of view, at least in part, that I approach glam rock. Often relegated to the categories of ‘low’ culture and ‘commercial pop music’ (rather than being taken seriously as a musical form), I argue that glam, *because of* its popularity and commercial success, is a genre that articulates a specific cultural moment – and as such, requires attention.<sup>6</sup>

Neither of the aforementioned studies, however, address the glam genre in any analytical detail. Hunt, however, does make some worthwhile observations in regard to glam’s relationship with what he terms the 1970s “crisis of masculinity”.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, he acknowledges glam as an ‘optimistic’ musical genre that succeeded “in the face of the recession”,<sup>8</sup> and he briefly outlines the primary differences between ‘high’ and ‘low’ glam, which I will discuss in the next section.

In 2008, Portsmouth University hosted the *British Culture and Society in the 1970s* conference. The book *British Culture and Society in the 1970s: The Lost Decade* (Forster and Harper, 2010) is the outcome of this conference, comprising a

---

<sup>5</sup> Bart Moore-Gilbert, *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), 12.

<sup>6</sup> It is important to note, however, that despite being a ‘pop’ form not always regarded as ‘serious music’, glam rock has been an enduring influence on contemporary acts, and this can be seen (as Hunt also notes) in several examples from the music press. British bands such as Primal Scream, Suede and Placebo, for example, all acknowledged a debt of influence to T. Rex and David Bowie. More recently, British act The Gorillaz have acknowledged Gary Glitter in an album track by the name of ‘Glitter Freeze’ (*Plastic Beach*, 2010) which samples Glitter’s ‘Rock N’ Roll Part 1’ and ‘Rock N’ Roll Part 2’ (*Glitter*, 1972).

<sup>7</sup> Leon Hunt, *British Low Culture: From Safari Suits to Sexploitation* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 57–59.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

collection of essays encompassing topics as diverse as John Berger, magazines, films, critical theory, social spaces, and *The Wombles*. With the aim of rescuing the 1970s from its aforementioned reputation as the decade of bad taste, what this collection of essays sets out to demonstrate is that the 1970s is characterised by social change, hardship, fragmentation, and as “a period of cultural exuberance and plenitude”.<sup>9</sup> The editors assert also, that “demands for change” in the 1970s were articulated across a wide range of cultural outputs, and that there is more work to be done in this area. The sheer variety of these outputs, Forster and Harper point out, characterise the 1970s, rendering the decade less simple to define than the 1960s or 1980s. Hence, their overarching definition of the seventies is that of a period embodying a multiplicity of forms. As Forster and Harper argue, “the depth of both protest and innovation has to be assessed if we want to engage with the decade in a meaningful way”.<sup>10</sup> Although glam appears apolitical when taken at face value, its tendency to carnivalesque escapism may be seen as a protest against increasingly unpalatable social and economic conditions. In the case of high glam, as characterised by Bowie, Roxy Music and Steve Harley and Cockney Rebel, I posit that a sense of fragmentation and alienation is often present within the music and lyrical content,<sup>11</sup> thus reflecting 1970s socio-political concerns through the genre’s varied musical and visual forms, and through its approaches to performance.

Additionally, several relatively new popular books exist which document the events of the 1970s in Britain. As popular histories, they provide an excellent overview of relevant events. These works include Alwyn Turner’s *Crisis? What Crisis?* (2009), Andy Beckett’s *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (2009), Francis Wheen’s *Strange Days Indeed: The Golden Age of Paranoia* (2009), and Dominic Sandbrook’s *State of Emergency: The Way We Were, Britain 1970-1974* (2010). Taken together, it is clear that popular narratives of 1970s Britain focus on moments of social crisis, such as strikes, power cuts and unemployment. 1970s popular culture is also given comment, particularly in Turner’s overview,

---

<sup>9</sup> Laurel Forster, *British Culture and Society in the 1970s: The Lost Decade* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> This is most readily apparent in Bowie’s body of work, as Chapman (2015 and 2016) argues. The very act of adopting various masks or personae – a hallmark of the glam genre – may be seen, in itself, as an expression of alienation.

and in Sounes' *Seventies: The Sights, Sounds and Ideas of a Brilliant Decade* (2006). There are many popular books on 1970s popular culture, in which the music scene is well-documented (anecdotally and pictorially), but not engaged with academically. Nick Kent's *Apathy for the Devil: A 1970s Memoir* (2010) is one such example, in which the author documents his experiences as a British rock journalist – it is a popular account of the period from an 'insider's' point of view. While it is not my project to engage directly with these texts, it is important to acknowledge the ongoing, and steadily increasing, presence of the 1970s and their cultural output in the contemporary popular imagination. In popular culture, glam has been represented most notably in Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), a stylised, fictional 'biopic' with characters reputedly based on Bowie and Iggy Pop. Glam has also functioned as an expression of the desire for escape in *Billy Elliot* (2000), a film which is especially pertinent in regard to the social effects of British economic difficulty, and in regard to the film's challenge to conventional masculinity. Further to this, the film *Breakfast On Pluto* (2005) sets glam and androgyny within the context of Irish political upheaval, with explicit reference to the IRA bombings of the 1970s. Most recently, and importantly in terms of contextualising the cultural relevance of my chosen topic, the Tate Liverpool gallery in 2013 ran a glam exhibition entitled *Glam! The Performance of Style*, and London's Victoria and Albert Museum exhibited *David Bowie is*, showcasing items from Bowie's personal archive, including the original costumes that he wore in his most iconic music videos and stage performances. *David Bowie is* aimed to demonstrate "how Bowie's work has both influenced and been influenced by wider movements in art, design, theatre and contemporary culture and focusses on his creative processes, shifting style and collaborative work with diverse designers in the fields of fashion, sound, graphics, theatre and film".<sup>12</sup> The exhibition has since toured internationally, and in 2015 the University Melbourne's *The Stardom and Celebrity of David Bowie* symposium ran alongside the exhibition at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne, Australia.

---

<sup>12</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum, 'Touring Exhibition: David Bowie Is', accessed 16 July 2016, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/touring-exhibition-david-bowie-is/>.

This growing interest in the 1970s, and in glam, is part of a move to re-evaluate the decade and its cultural output. The 1970s have until recently been largely a 'forgotten decade', and this is especially so in comparison to the body of work that has been produced on the 1960s and its cultural forms. In part, this intensive focus on the 1960s is attributable to a problematic romanticism and apoliticism surrounding that decade, which persists even though it has been over four decades since the 1960s ended. Hewison's work on the cultural output of the 1960s extends up to 1975, and it is my contention that 'the 1970s' could in fact be seen as beginning in 1968, at least insofar that 1968 stands in the popular and academic imagination as the pivotal historical moment in which the innocence and idealism of the 1960s ended in a culmination of riots and failed revolution. The international *zeitgeist* of the late 1960s had been one informed by political unrest, including the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, the United States Civil Rights movement, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr, Malcom X and John F. Kennedy, and the Vietnam War – and as such, events during that period contributed to a sense of the necessity of 'revolution'.<sup>13</sup> However as Kolker (2009) states, "the student and worker uprisings in France [particularly, the student uprising of May '68 in Paris] were an outpouring of emotions and ideas, but stopped short of convincing the bourgeoisie of their power and hope",<sup>14</sup> and this sense of 'incomplete revolution' in a sense, demarcates 1968 as the point for many at which 'the 1960s' and its attendant promises of prosperity and political change came to a crashing end.

In Britain, the sense of unrest and pessimism under a Conservative Government (1970-1974) was evident in racial tensions, strikes, inflation and declining consumer buoyancy. The 1970 and 1972 dockers' strikes led to the declaration of a national emergency. Postal workers also went on strike in 1971; and there were protests in London and Glasgow against the government's proposed Industrial Relations Act, which – if passed into law – would limit strike action. In response to

---

<sup>13</sup> See Donato Totaro, 'May 1968 and After: Cinema in France and Beyond, Part 1 – Offscreen' 2, no. 2 (March 1998), [http://offscreen.com/view/may\\_1968](http://offscreen.com/view/may_1968) for a full discussion of how these international events contributed to further politicisation of cinema and film theory.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Phillip Kolker, *The Altering Eye: Contemporary International Cinema* (Open Book Publishers, 2009), 276.

the proposed Act, the Angry Brigade exploded a bomb outside the home of Conservative politician Robert Carr. The group was also responsible for placing a bomb at the Department of Employment offices; their later bomb attack on London's fashionable Biba department store represented an intense anger towards the rise of consumerism. In 1972, British unemployment had risen to its highest level since the 1930s, and the 1972 coal miners' strike led to another state of emergency. In 1973, railway workers went on strike and so did civil servants; at the end of that year, the coal miners' industrial action, coupled with the 1973 oil crisis, led to coal shortages that, in turn, led to the government's introduction of the Three Day Week. This measure meant that commercial electricity consumption was restricted, and thus, employees were permitted to work only three days per week. Another effect of the Three Day Week was that television broadcasting was required to end at 10.30pm each night. Throughout the period, conflict in Northern Ireland led to increasing IRA bombings in the city of London, and the recession and its emergency measures led to comparisons with wartime and the Depression. This 'wartime' or 'pre-war' mood was made explicit in the release of The Sweet's single 'Blockbuster!', which opens with the sound of a siren (the 'blockbuster' being a World War II bomb used by the Royal Air Force).

At the beginning of the 1970s, the counter-culture's conservatism had also become apparent, not least in terms of its heteronormativity and androcentricity.<sup>15</sup> The *OZ* trial in 1971 led to the conviction of the underground publication's editors on indecency charges, after an issue put together by teenagers (including later rock journalist Charles Shaar-Murray) included explicit sexual content. The controversy demonstrated the conservatism within counter-cultural formations, with one of the offending images being a cartoon of Rupert the Bear sexually violating an unconscious woman. In terms of the music scene, Thompson (2000), Hoskyns (1998) and Auslander (2006) concur that both music and fashion had become stale, stuck in a rut of serious inward gazing and 'drab denim outfits'. The Beatles had split up in 1970, and influential British radio DJ John Peel, a contemporary of Bolan and Bowie, commented years later: "By 1970, 71, people had realised that

---

<sup>15</sup> Philip Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (University of Michigan Press, 2006), 31.

the counter-culture was a bit of a joke”.<sup>16</sup> The political failure of 1968 and the incorporation of ‘hippies’ into mass commodity culture had no doubt contributed to this perspective, along with the “rut” to which Thompson, Hoskyns and Auslander refer. It is interesting to note that both Bolan and Bowie were, in their pre-glam careers, entrenched in the counter-cultural scene; Bolan spent much of his early career in psychedelic band John’s Children, performing in hippie-frequented venues such as London’s Middle Earth, and at the first Glastonbury Festival (at that stage Glastonbury was not the corporate event that it is today). It is well-documented that when Bolan switched from acoustic to electric guitar, and from sitting cross-legged on the stage to standing up, his hippie audience (including the aforementioned John Peel) were outraged – Bolan, apparently, had ‘sold out’. Auslander suggests, and perhaps not incorrectly, that it was not that Bolan ‘sold out’, but that British youth of the 1970s were ready for a new form of music and a new ‘scene’; and the music scene, by extension, was ready for a new niche market.

Among the youth, there was also a perceived need for ‘something new’ in the *cultural and political* sense, and this was born out of dissatisfaction with the aforementioned increasingly demoralising socio-cultural, economic and political conditions. There were several developments, however, that together helped to ‘clear the path’ for glam’s arrival. In 1967, the Sexual Offences Act decriminalised homosexuality in Britain; and in 1968, official censoring ceased for any production for the public stage.<sup>17</sup> Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammel’s film *Performance* was released soon thereafter in 1970, depicting Mick Jagger’s character ‘Turner’ as an androgynous, bisexual rock star. During the 1970s, the arrival of colour television<sup>18</sup> opened up the visual possibilities for performers, and one of which glam took full advantage, with its flamboyant and colourful visual styling. The vehicle of weekly music chart show *Top of the Pops*, in particular, was of key importance for glam rock throughout its life cycle. Thompson notes of glam and its cultural context that, “musically, Glam might well have been little more than a hysterical reaction to the

---

<sup>16</sup> Hoskyns, *Glam!*, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Dave Thompson, *Children of the Revolution: The Glam Rock Story, 1970-1975* (London: Cherry Red Books, 2000), 20–21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

musical and cultural stagnation of the previous couple of years. But it was also a social revolution, a cultural uprising, an erotic explosion and a moral reassessment. Glam Rock was Sex Rock, Art Rock, Poetry Rock, Mime Rock, West End Musical Rock, Edgy Art-house Cinema Rock and more, and none of those components would be the same again”.<sup>19</sup> On all levels, then, and at least for the young people of Britain, there was a need for change, a need for escape, a need for *some kind* of revolution.

### **‘Children of the Revolution’: Introducing Glam**

Glam was a music phenomenon that emerged out of London in the early 1970s, primarily between the years 1971-1974 – roughly the same period as the Conservative Party’s term in government (the Conservatives would rise to power again in 1979, under Thatcher). The genre was spearheaded by Bolan, Bowie, and importantly, their producer Tony Visconti – who played an important role in the ‘T. Rex sound’ as well as in how Bowie’s glam albums sounded to the world. Both Bolan and Bowie had been part of the counter-cultural hippie scene. Previously, they had both also been mods, Bolan having been a model and known ‘face’ on the scene. Bolan achieved mild success in acoustic duo Tyrannosaurus Rex, and Bowie had performed as a folk singer and mime artist. Around 1971, Bolan had already gone ‘electric’ with the *T. Rex* album (and the band’s attendant name-change), and Bowie had appeared on the album cover of *The Man Who Sold the World* (1970) dressed in women’s clothing. These events are key in the early development of glam, along with Bowie’s introduction to Andy Warhol and the production of *Pork* in New York in 1971. However, there is a consensus across all of the literature on glam, both academic and non-academic, that there are two key, iconic moments in the history of the genre: Bolan performing ‘Hot Love’ on *Top of the Pops* with glitter on his cheeks in 1971; and in 1972, Bowie performing ‘Starman’ as the ‘alien’ character Ziggy Stardust, also on *Top of the Pops* (I will further discuss this key moment in chapter three). Two women are credited with being pivotal in the development of early glam: Bolan’s stylist Chelita Secunda, who decided on the idea of applying glitter to Bolan’s cheeks for the aforementioned *Top of the Pops*

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 22.

performance; and Bowie's then-wife, Angela Bowie, whose androgynous styling influenced him most notably in the creation of Ziggy Stardust. During this period, Bolan's band T. Rex released their most successful albums, *Electric Warrior* (1971) and *The Slider* (1972), and Bowie released his key glam albums *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972) and *Aladdin Sane* (1973). Both artists embarked on highly successful British tours, Bolan's culminating in the 'T. Rextasy' phenomenon and Bolan's 1972 concert at London's Wembley Pool, which was documented in the 1972 film *Born to Boogie*. Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust* tour was also documented on film, as *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1973). During this brief period, Bolan achieved chart success with the singles 'Ride A White Swan', 'Hot Love', 'Get It On (Bang A Gong)', 'Jeepster', 'Telegram Sam', 'Metal Guru', 'Children of the Revolution', 'Solid Gold Easy Action', and in 1973, '20<sup>th</sup> Century Boy'. His musical career began much earlier, in John's Children and in Tyrannosaurus Rex, and extended up until his death 1977, and for the most part, he remained 'glam' even when the genre itself had lost popularity. Bowie's most successful 'glam' years were 1972-1973, and his singles chart successes during this period included 'Starman', 'John, I'm Only Dancing', 'Jean Genie', 'Drive-In Saturday', and 'Life On Mars?'. Bands that followed Bolan and Bowie onto the music scene, and who were categorised as glam in the popular media, included Roxy Music with *Roxy Music* (1972) and *For Your Pleasure* (1973), and Steve Harley's Cockney Rebel with *The Human Menagerie* (1973) and *The Psychomodo* (1974), and the hit singles 'Judy Teen' (1973) and 'Mr Soft' (1974).<sup>20</sup> The Sweet, fronted by Brian Connolly, achieved chart success with the pop hits 'Poppa Joe', 'Little Willy', 'Wig Wam Bam' (1972), 'Block Buster!', 'Hell Raiser', and 'Ballroom Blitz' (1973), and Slade topped (and/or almost-topped) the charts with 'Coz I Love You', 'Look Wot U Dun' (1971), 'Take Me Bak 'Ome', 'Gudbuy T' Jane', 'Mama Weer All Crazee Now' (1972), 'Skweeze Me, Pleeze Me' (1973), 'My Friend Stan' and 'Cum On Feel the Noize' (1974). Gary Glitter released the chart-topping, anthemic singles 'Rock and Roll (Part One)' (1972), 'Do You Wanna Touch Me (Oh Yeah)', 'Hello, Hello, I'm Back Again', and 'I'm The Leader of the Gang (I Am)' (1973), and

---

<sup>20</sup> Cockney Rebel's 'Tumbling Down' and 'Sebastian' featured in Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine*. And although these songs were not chart hits in the 1970s, the fact that Haynes chose to feature them prominently in the film is testament to the band's importance within the genre.

Suzi Quatro was the 'female face' of glam with the singles 'Can The Can', '48 Crash', 'Daytona Demon' (1973), and 'Devil Gate Drive' (1974). The British charts saw many more acts marketed under the 'glam' banner such as Mud, The Rubettes, Wizzard, and Sparks. Given that the musical and visual stylings of these 'glam' acts were so diverse, it is important that we discuss the ways in which glam has been defined and categorised.

### **High Glam/Low Glam**

Glam rock, at the very broadest level, is a genre of music defined by the *visual style* of its artists. During the 1970s, performers whose stage appearance was markedly androgynous and theatrical were categorised as glam. The genre's musical styles ranged from sophisticated and/or avant-garde-influenced rock-pop songwriting (Bowie, Roxy Music, Cockney Rebel), to 1950s rock n' roll and blues-inspired pop rock (T. Rex), and 'bubblegum pop' (The Sweet, Suzi Quatro). As such, discussions of glam have tended to define the genre in terms of 'high' and 'low' glam: 'high glam' including Bowie, Roxy Music and Cockney Rebel; and 'low glam' including The Sweet, Slade, Gary Glitter, and Suzi Quatro. As Thompson points out, Bolan's work has been said to sit somewhere in between 'high' and 'low' (I would suggest however that it contains elements of both categorisations, and as such, he remains a liminal figure in the history of glam). Given that what is categorised as 'glam' is so variable, it is difficult to discuss the genre without first addressing these terms and their definitions. Broadly, we can compare the difference between 'high' and 'low' glam as to the difference between the broadly defined categories 'rock' and 'pop'. That is, the difference occurs in terms of perceived authenticity, whereby 'rock' performers are the writers of their own, more 'serious' music, and 'pop' performers may not always write their own music (the content of which may not explicitly have something 'serious' to say). These categories are in themselves constructed, contentious, and set up a binary that does not necessarily hold true. Bowie, Bolan, Roxy Music and Steve Harley, who are all acknowledged as 'high glam' artists, were marketed as 'modern artists', in that they were seen as the authors of their own artistic vision. While glam rock is most certainly an example of music as a commodity, what differentiates these aforementioned 'high glam' artists from their 'low glam' counterparts is the perceived sense of artistry, or

authorship, and as Branch (2012) points out, whether the fans themselves chose to align themselves with the artists that were perceived as ‘intellectual’ or those that were ‘rock n’ roll’. That is, whereas ‘low glam’ artists such as The Sweet and Suzi Quatro performed music written by a team of songwriters (Mike Chapman and Nicky Chinn, collectively known as ‘Chinnichap’), Bowie, Bolan, Bryan Ferry and Harley wrote their own songs and were perceived as the authors of their own vision both musically and aesthetically. In this sense, we are able to position high glam as occupying a particularly interesting ‘space’ in the music industry of the 1970s. That is, it was a time when the music industry allowed for new expressions of creativity, and as such, had not reached the levels of standardisation and mass marketing that we see in the industry today. This is not to say, however, that standardisation did not exist in the music industry. The ‘manufactured pop group’ was very much alive and well in this era, and ‘low glam’ acts were perceived as such, especially by the ‘serious’ rock music press. That is, they were seen as products of the culture industry making formulaic music for the masses, or in Adorno’s terms, as a “debasement of culture”.<sup>21</sup> The 1970s, however, were also a time of experimentation, with innovations in dance, theatre, cinema and music. Bowie in particular drew upon these more avant-garde cultural forms, and in this sense, the work he produced was particularly innovative in itself, reflecting a certain amount of authorial freedom. Bowie, Harley and Roxy Music, additionally, self-consciously positioned themselves as avant-garde. Furthermore, how these artists engaged with other, pre-existing artistic/media forms and texts such as theatre, cinema, literature, art, and philosophy was both formally innovative in the field of rock music, and reflective of the political and socio-cultural mood of the time.<sup>22</sup> That is, by ‘cutting and pasting’ and layering a range of cultural reference points into their works, these glam artists simultaneously reveal an escapist, utopian impulse (through the creation of otherworlds or ‘alternate realities’) while also engaging with contemporary dystopian outlooks. All of this sums up what we might call ‘art glam’ as encapsulating a pivotal moment in not only rock/pop history, but also, within a period of ongoing social crisis and socio-cultural change.

---

<sup>21</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1989), 113.

<sup>22</sup> Roxy Music’s visual and musical aesthetic was built upon the idea of collage – the theory and practice of which, Bryan Ferry studied at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne.

Furthermore, it does so in a particularly carnivalesque manner, wherein the *form and expression* of the carnivalesque is specific to a particular time and place – that is, 1970s Britain.

Despite their self-conscious positioning as ‘avant-garde’ however, these high glam (or ‘art’ glam) artists achieved commercial success. As such, the fact that they were working within ‘the music industry’ is problematic, particularly in regard to the fact that rock and pop music is a mass cultural form. Similarly, these artists’ osmosis of avant-garde ‘styles’ into deliberately *theatrical* performances is contradictory; that is, the avant-garde usually exists outside the boundaries of both conventional ‘theatre’ and mass entertainment, and so, these artists’ avant-garde leanings cannot be said to be truly ‘fringe’. The fact remains, however, that these artists’ work *did* engage with contemporary preoccupations in a way that was not only visually and often sonically experimental for its time, but it was also subversive in that it worked to destabilise conservative, conventional binaries of gender and sexuality.

Whether a form that is considered artistic and ‘intellectual’ should be considered *carnavalesque* is also problematic, as the carnivalesque is, in Bakhtin’s terms, a social safety valve for the masses, expressing the base impulses and coalescing around the lower bodily stratum, rather than an intellectual pursuit. While gaining critical kudos, however, ‘high glam’ at the same time achieved mass popularity, presenting audiences with a ‘world upside down’ escapism via a series of masks which the audience could also adopt (for example, Bowie fans attending a concert ‘in character’ as Aladdin Sane). The contradiction here is not one that is easily resolved, and perhaps given that the 1970s were a period of instability, change and experimentation, this contradiction may be seen as indicative of a deeper hegemonic struggle. It is within this context, then, that Bolan and Bowie acted as key, pivotal figures – and I will discuss these points in further detail in the following chapters. First, however, it is necessary to outline and discuss the ways that glam has been approached thus far.

## **Theoretical Responses to Glam**

The academic responses to glam have, thus far, fallen into two categories: glam as apolitical or even reactionary, and therefore a conservative genre; and glam as potentially critical or radical. Hebdige (1979) characterised glam as reactionary, and Taylor and Wall (1976) also framed glam as conservative. More recently, Cagle (1995), Gregory (2002), Auslander (2006), Lenig (2010) and Branch (2012) have reconsidered the genre, re-framing it as transgressive, radical, and as reflecting a specific cultural and socio-political moment. This shift, or re-consideration of glam in terms of its ideological underpinnings, itself reflects the recent resignifying of the 1970s as period of important social change and serious cultural output. Most recently, and after most of this thesis had been written, several books have been published on glam (Chapman and Johnson, 2016) and David Bowie (Cinque, Moore and Redmond, 2015; Devereaux, Dillane and Power, 2015; and Waldrep, 2015) which continue this trajectory of resignification. Most significantly, 2015 was the year in which 'Bowie Studies' began to firmly establish itself as a scholarly field, with the aforementioned authors framing Bowie's output as innovative, radical, and counter-hegemonic. Following Bowie's death in 2016, numerous articles and obituaries in the popular media reiterated his cultural impact as a radical and transformative figure, particularly in terms of gender, sexuality and identity. It is, however, too early for any new scholarly publications to have appeared that might discuss the impact of Bowie's death or the tributes that followed.

### ***Glam as Reactionary***

Taylor and Wall's 1976 sociological analysis of glam takes as its central point the function of glam rock as a working class, or perhaps more accurately 'lumpen proletariat', youth subculture. In doing so, their analysis links the popularity of glam with its most tellingly 'working class' elements; and this working class-ness, they argue, is the link from British skinhead (and football) subcultures to 'low glam' acts such as Slade and the Sweet. The only 'high glam' artist analysed here is Bowie, and the only point that Taylor and Wall offer to illustrate his 'working class-

ness' is the presence, in his music, of a "working class rock beat".<sup>23</sup> It seems that although the music press of the period did seek to differentiate between high and low glam, Taylor and Wall here appear *not* to make this differentiation, or at least not explicitly. Had they done so, the apparent contradiction of such a masculine, working class genre/subculture coalescing around an androgynous figure such as Bowie, would not seem so contradictory in and of itself; I argue that rather, glam is a bifurcated genre with each branch a different expression of the carnivalesque. That is, each bifurcation embodies a different ideological position, particularly in regards to identity politics, and comes with its own, much more internalised set of contradictions – this dialectic articulating a deeper hegemonic struggle.

Taylor and Wall's analysis, then, is one that is oversimplified. This is further compounded by their critique of glam (and particularly of Bowie) as a product and vehicle of consumer capitalism. While glam rock is a commercial form, it is better understood when seen not just in terms of complicity with mass culture and consumption; such a critique, alongside Taylor and Wall's assertion that Bowie does not challenge the standards of bourgeois society, or present any alternative to those standards,<sup>24</sup> only serves to limit any deeper investigation of the genre's particular form and function.

Following Taylor and Wall, Hebdige (1979) briefly discusses glam, and again, particularly Bowie. While stating that Bowie lacked interest in contemporary politics, Hebdige notes that "his entire aesthetic was predicated upon a deliberate avoidance of the 'real' world and the prosaic language in which that world was habitually described, experienced and produced";<sup>25</sup> also that that his "meta-message was escape – from class, from sex, from personality, from obvious commitment – into a fantasy past [...] or a science-fiction future".<sup>26</sup> He also notes that in glam (referring to Bowie and Roxy Music), "the subversive emphasis was

---

<sup>23</sup> Ian Taylor and David Wall, 'Beyond the Skinheads: Comments on the Emergence and Significance of the Glamrock Cult', in *Working Class Youth Culture*, ed. Geoff Mungham and Geoffrey Pearson (London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), 111.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>25</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London; New York: Routledge, 1979), 61.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

shifted away from class and youth onto sexuality and gender typing”,<sup>27</sup> and yet questioning whether Bowie’s “disguise and dandyism” represented “any ‘genuine’ transcendence of sexual role play”.<sup>28</sup> As such, Hebdige essentially frames glam as a reactionary genre, complicit in maintaining the ideological status quo. However, Hebdige’s claim that subcultures are ‘real’ or more authentic is problematic in that it sets up a dualism that by necessity positions all pop music, including glam, as therefore ‘not real’ and ‘inauthentic’, and therefore not worthy of study. This dualism is reconsidered, however, in more recent writing on the glam; and it is this more recent work that reappraises glam as a radical genre.

### ***Glam as Radical***

Cagle’s 1995 study of ‘glitter rock’ is the first to begin reconsidering glam. While Cagle’s focus is on Pop Art and American ‘glitter’ artists Alice Cooper, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, and the New York Dolls, he does begin to consider Bowie (and Roxy Music) in terms of visual style and the ‘subcultural impact’ of glitter. In doing this, he places glam on the radical side of Hebdige’s subculture-mainstream dualism. It is important to note that the term ‘glitter’ is primarily associated with the aforementioned American artists, whereas ‘glam’ is associated with British acts – glitter being something akin to glam’s ‘dirtier’ American cousin, both visually and musically. This generic distinction, and the ‘cross-pollination’ between these British and American artists warrants further discussion in itself – however, for our purposes, it is more important to note that Cagle’s primary contribution to re-framing glam as ‘radical’ or critical is his assertion that glitter (including Bowie) articulated “a method for denouncing traditional notions of sexuality and gender”,<sup>29</sup> exposing “gaps in the heterosexual hegemony”.<sup>30</sup> While Cagle concurs that the genre was a popular, commercial form, he also notes that it was at once a ‘celebration and critique’<sup>31</sup> in that it demonstrated “that to effectively transmit oppositional ideas, one had to be at the centre of popular culture”.<sup>32</sup> In this sense,

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 61–62.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>29</sup> Van Cagle, *Reconstructing Pop/Subculture: Art, Rock, and Andy Warhol* (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 1995), 223.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

Cagle argues, Bowie's performance of androgynous, bisexual identities in fact challenged the system from within. His work, then, is pivotal in that it begins to explore the ideological tensions inherent within the genre.

Gregory (2002), several years after Cagle, approaches glam in terms of its "stylistic apparatus",<sup>33</sup> and with regard to how the genre's sense of visuality reflects glam's engagement with issues around gender and sexuality. In particular, she discusses the legal status of homosexuality, and women's liberation (including greater sexual freedoms for women through contraception, equal pay, and the Matrimonial Property Act 1970).<sup>34</sup> The fashion codes employed by glam rockers, she argues, "exposed and challenged the hegemony of the prevailing metanarrative of heterosexual male freedom within 1970s popular culture".<sup>35</sup> Further, she poses the question as to whether the dress codes of glam rockers exposed a hegemonic "inherent misogyny and homophobia" that existed in dominant culture in spite of 1960s "sexual liberation".<sup>36</sup> Noting that glam "made simultaneous references to both the future and the past",<sup>37</sup> Gregory charts the changes in menswear from the early 1960s, incorporating the emergence of unisex fashion and, in terms of popular music, citing the Rolling Stones' move towards "sexually ambiguous 'dandyism'".<sup>38</sup> She notes that this increasing feminisation of men's fashion not only challenged the jeans-and-shirt 'masculine' visual style of serious progressive rock bands, but also, the broader and more ingrained social norms pertaining to the visual codes of masculinity. The significance of Gregory's work is that it is, along with Cagle's exploration of glitter rock, one of the first pieces to take glam 'seriously' and consider the genre as a subculture with visual codes that reflected the social issues and political developments of the 1970s – challenging or transgressing established norms. In Hebdige's model, this sets up glam as a form of

---

<sup>33</sup> Georgina Gregory, 'Masculinity, Sexuality and the Visual Culture of Glam Rock', *Culture & Communication* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

resistant style.<sup>39</sup> Where my own work builds upon this, is to consider this resistance as part of a wider expression of the carnivalesque.

Auslander's *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music* (2006) was at the time of writing, the most detailed, recent full-length published academic work in the area of glam rock. Previous to Auslander's study, Hoskyns (1998) and Thompson (2000) were the main texts available to those wishing to study the genre. These texts, however, function more as generalised overviews of glam rock rather than as academic studies offering any sort of serious critical engagement. As such, and given this relative paucity of existing published academic work on glam rock, Auslander refers to these works along with more general studies of rock music, and he does so mostly within his own area of Performance Studies. His work is the first full-length piece to fully critically engage with some of the key concepts of glam as a genre, such as the performance of gender and the centrality of the notion of *theatricality* (Cagle also touches upon this idea in relation to Bowie). Auslander's work, then, is of key importance in establishing glam rock as an area for academic study, especially with regards to its generic components and its place within rock music and popular culture. Many of the arguments he sets forth lay the foundations for critical understanding of the genre, while others open up questions for further research and discussion. In what follows, I will outline Auslander's approach to glam rock and engage with the major points of his research, particularly in relation to my own work.

Auslander's approach, as I have mentioned, is that of Performance Studies. As such, he engages with performances on video and in audio recordings, and he does so with regard to questions of gender, genre, and 'authenticity'. Throughout his analyses of his chosen artists (Bolan, Bowie, Bryan Ferry, Roy Wood and Suzi Quatro), his argument centres on the notions of masculine versus feminine, heterosexual versus homosexual, and authentic versus inauthentic. Specifically, he applies these broad categories to the notion of *persona*; and in this way, he investigates the ways in which these artists' performance strategies coalesce

---

<sup>39</sup> Muggleton (2000) built upon Hebdige's work on subcultural style in his examination of post-subcultural style and its inherent unconventionality.

around the construction of gender and sexual identities, and the *constructedness* of glam rock personae in general. Butler's work on gender performance, and the constructed nature of that performance, is key in relation to Bolan and Bowie's expression of gender and sexuality, and I will refer to her work in chapter three. In relation to my own research, I frame Bolan and Bowie's adoption of stage personae such as Bowie's 'Ziggy Stardust' and 'Aladdin Sane', or Bolan's construction as 'The Warlock of Love' and 'The Bopping Elf', as a form of the carnival *mask*. Moreover, I discuss their performance of androgynous identities as being an expression of the carnivalesque 'world upside down'. Further to this, I investigate the ways in which these 'personae' interact with (and are products of) their historical and cultural moment. So, while ideas of gender and authenticity are integral to understanding glam rock, I argue that these ideas are also starting points for understanding glam, and that Bowie and Bolan's glam performances extend *beyond* gender and sexuality. That is, they also constructed themselves as 'fantastical Others' inhabiting 'fantastical Otherworlds'; their performances of gender and sexuality, then, formed an integral part of this Otherness. This in itself has implications *beyond* questions of musical genre. That is, in examining British glam rock as emblematic of a *historical moment*, my research aims to highlight the genre as particularly carnivalesque, and as embodying a utopian impulse specific to the social, cultural and political conditions of 1970s Britain.

Auslander also discusses the shift from countercultural, psychedelic rock to an ethos of glamour and artifice, and he does so in light of the British law reforms regarding homosexuality. My research, however, broadens the frame. That is, I view glam as not just a musical genre that arose as backlash against the counterculture, or as simply reflecting the increasing acceptability of homosexuality. Rather, in some ways, glam rock could be said to have *arisen* from the counterculture (especially given that both Bolan and Bowie were part of this very counterculture prior to innovating the glam style), remodulating its sense of 'difference' into an openly festive, theatrical and deceptively 'apolitical' form.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> I say 'deceptively apolitical' because glam rock made no openly political statements – and it appears, on the surface, to be purely about 'having fun'. However, when examined closely in relation to its political context, glam is a product of its historical moment, and is inscribed with 'politics' whether it professes to be or not.

While Auslander divides glam into the chronological categories of ‘first wave’ and ‘second wave’, he avoids making any distinction between high and low glam, because, he argues, “it makes little sense to discuss a mass cultural form such as rock music in terms of a dichotomy between art and commerce since rock [is all] produced as a cultural commodity”.<sup>41</sup> It is important to note, however, that popular culture does maintain this distinction, most notably because ‘authenticity’, insofar as we can apply the term to high glam, is a selling point in itself. While glam was most certainly a commodified form, my purpose in making the distinction between high and low glam is not to privilege one over the other,<sup>42</sup> but rather to examine the internal rules of high glam as a ‘subgenre’, investigating its features and functions in regard to both Bolan and Bowie.

Further to this, Auslander links glam with 1950s rock n’ roll, and he is correct here in that Bolan himself was heavily influenced by the 1950s, citing Eddie Cochran as a major influence. The 1950s were also central to the 1970s ‘nostalgia’ phenomenon, and Auslander frames this in primarily American terms, citing Sha Na Na, *Grease*, and *Happy Days* as points of reference.<sup>43</sup> This ‘nostalgia’ aspect is often mobilised as a critique of glam rock – however, it is also important to separate glam from popular ‘nostalgia’ acts of the day (I include acts such as The Rubettes in this category, although they are frequently included in glam rock histories). Glam, and particularly high glam, utilises *bricolage*, drawing upon the musical, filmic, and theatrical forms of *several* different periods, and it does so in sophisticated ways. The glam reconfiguring of past eras into contemporary form articulates a very specific, 1970s British *zeitgeist*. So, where Auslander has begun to discuss glam in relation to 1950s nostalgia, I extend this frame of reference in order to place glam within its wider, primarily *British*, media context.

---

<sup>41</sup> Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 52.

<sup>42</sup> As Auslander notes, Hebdige divides the glam rock audience into two groups: teenyboppers, and the older, more ‘serious’ fans. See Auslander, *ibid.* and Hebdige, 62.

<sup>43</sup> I disagree with Auslander’s conjecture that Sha Na Na were forerunners to glam. While T. Rex’s *Electric Warrior* was influenced in part by 1950s rock n’ roll, I put this down to the fact that Bolan was a professed rock n’ roll fan since his childhood. I think it is more accurate to state that the emergence of Sha Na Na in the USA is to do with the 1970s’ *nostalgia* phenomenon, and that this nostalgia forms part of the media *background* against which glam rock is set. In terms of glam rockers adopting performance personae (as did Sha Na Na, whose members were ‘characters’ such as ‘Bowzer’), this has more to do with Bowie’s background as an actor and performance artist, and with glam’s interaction with past eras of stage and screen entertainment.

In regards to Auslander's analysis of individual glam rock artists, he has made some necessary and worthwhile observations. My own research, while acknowledging Auslander's vital contribution in this area, has one major point of departure. That is, whereas he discusses Bolan and Bowie in terms of gender coding and questions of 'authenticity', I discuss these artists in terms of the wider implications of their constructed personae in the context of 1970s Britain. Auslander's work is extremely useful in making clear some of the basic elements that underpin the glam genre, and much of the historical context that he sets out is a good starting point for understanding the media landscape that glam rock arose from, particularly in relation to late 1960s 'psychedelic rock'.

Building on Auslander's work, Lenig (2010) suggests three theoretical sources for glam rock: Marshall McLuhan, Andy Warhol, and Guy Debord (in particular, *Society of the Spectacle*). He suggests that these sources' varied emphases on surface appearance and media images were primary forces in shaping glam as a visually-focused, media-(hyper)aware entertainment form. While Warhol and the pop art movement influenced Bowie and Roxy Music in particular, I am less of the opinion that McLuhan and Debord had any direct influence on glam as a genre or on any of the individual artists. That is, though both of these figures discussed the nature of the media and its effects, it seems doubtful that Debord's neo-Marxist critique of spectacular society would be an actual source for Bolan or Roxy Music's engagement with/pastiche of popular media forms. Furthermore, while glam as a genre can be argued to have its own politics in terms of the contemporaneous issues of sexuality and identity, and as a reaction to and against the wider social and political conditions of the day, it is not in itself deliberately Marxist or neo-Marxist; neither is it an explicit critique of the media, or of spectacular society – though it is in itself absolutely media-aware, and knowingly visually spectacular. This points to glam's role within the music industry itself; that is, as a commercial product aimed at an audience of willing consumers (of commercial radio, the seven-inch single and twelve-inch vinyl album, and increasingly, of colour television). To reduce it to the status of merely a 'consumer product', however, is to overlook the ways in which glam reflected the politics of its times, and in doing

so, effectively closing it off from the rich analysis that it does in fact afford, including through critical theoretical frameworks. What Lenig most profitably offers us, however, is an insight to how the 'high glam' artists effectively engaged with pop art and performance style to create a new pop music genre, not only musically, but also visually and performatively.

Following Auslander, Lenig considers both British and American glam, and does so in relation to a relatively broad, international social context. Again, to consider glam as a genre of British origin with a specifically British social context allows a more focused analysis and hence deeper understanding of its specific generic features, and this is where my research adds to the work that Lenig and Auslander have begun. Additionally, Lenig and Auslander's analyses of glam as a theatrical form lay the groundwork for further discussion of glam in this respect. Again, Lenig's definitions here are relatively broad: he applies 'theatricality' and 'media', in regard to glam, to pop music artists such as Kate Bush, and post-1970s, Duran Duran, the Pet Shop Boys, Madonna and Lady Gaga. I would argue that it is important to instead view glam as a distinctly early 1970s phenomenon involving not just theatricality and androgyny, but also involving a musical style (or, *several* musical styles) particular to the early 1970s – that is, a musical style that is not characteristic of either Kate Bush or 1980s synth-pop music. As such, Lenig's definitions are much broader than are really profitable for a specific socioculturally-informed textual analysis of glam. In order to further explore the radical, transgressive nature of artists such as Bowie, it is necessary to consider glam in relation to a specific cultural moment, as it is this that allows us to further 'unpack' glam rock for critical understanding.

Branch (2012) engages with glam primarily in terms of subcultural analysis; that is, in relation to the genre's male working-class fans. In doing this, he examines how 'high glam' functioned in the 1970s as a form of "educational capital" (and thus as a signifier of social mobility) through its performance of 'educated' masculinity. Referring specifically to Bowie and Roxy Music, Branch notes that the high/low glam binary is a useful one (despite Auslander's opposition to it), as it does make clear the distinctions that the fans themselves made at the time –

particularly in terms of whether they wanted to identify with artists that were more intellectual, or with those that were more 'rock n' roll'. What Branch is getting at here is the "competing aesthetic positions"<sup>44</sup> of high and low glam (although the terminology he uses is "art school glam" and "rock 'n' roll glam"). The other popular categorisations of 'first wave' and 'second wave' glam are also useful, as the 'second wave high glam' artists are substantially more complex in their visual aesthetic, musical arrangements and lyrical content than those of the first wave (Branch includes Cockney Rebel, Sparks, Wizzard and Queen in the 'second wave' category).

One outcome of Branch's study is that fans viewed the low glam artists as "lacking artistic merit"<sup>45</sup> and that their performance of masculinity was viewed as "unmodern"<sup>46</sup> by the interview sample of socially mobile, educated males. In Branch's analysis, this view was a form of resistance to the popular yet "overwhelmingly negative representation of working-class masculinity" of the time as being "unmodern", not radical, or interested only in "sexual adventure".<sup>47</sup> In terms of this particular representation, he draws upon Leon Hunt's aforementioned study of 1970s 'low' popular culture. The fact that low glam was *also* associated with a primarily female, teenybopper audience is, I would argue, a factor in the subgenre's perceived 'lack of merit'. Branch also notes that the sound of glam can be "coded as masculine *and* feminine".<sup>48</sup> This is also an important feature of almost *all* glam artists' gender performance. That is, while these artists are visually androgynous, they also, at times, perform a *masculine, heterosexual* sexual identity. I will discuss this idea further in chapter three, in terms of Bolan performing a pronounced heterosexual identity, as well as the ways that Bolan and Bowie, additionally, work to confound all conventional distinctions of gender and sexuality. Importantly, Branch also notes that there is a "politics of pleasure"<sup>49</sup> in glam. The genre's "incubation of oppositional politics, especially in the field of

---

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Branch, 'All the Young Dudes: Educational Capital, Masculinity and the Uses of Popular Music', *Popular Music*, no. 31 (2012): 27.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

identity”, he notes, “meant that for a male working-class audience seeking social mobility, it offered a utopian vision in which masculinity was re-imagined as a malleable aesthetic identity to be remoulded at will”.<sup>50</sup>

As I mentioned previously, there is also now a growing body of work on David Bowie. Stevenson’s (2006) study of Bowie’s career spans the 1960s to the early 2000s, placing each period in its cultural context, demonstrating Bowie’s output as a reflection of its particular *zeitgeist*. Notably, he explores Bowie’s relationship with identity politics, and in particular, his position as a transformative figure. That is, he frames Bowie as suggesting new possibilities for masculinity.<sup>51</sup> In particular, he notes the character of Ziggy Stardust as offering audiences the experience of ‘difference’ as a form of escape from “the confines and limits of the ways in which they were regulated in everyday life”.<sup>52</sup> Here, Stevenson also invokes Bakhtin, noting that the atmosphere of the Bowie concert itself was carnivalesque, with the fans as carnival participants. That is, they participated in the concert with demonstrations of sexual activity, bodily fluids, and hyper-excitement. As I myself argue in chapter three, Stevenson frames 1970s Bowie as utopian, through what he describes as “the discursive unfixing of oppositions between straight and gay, natural and artificial, masculine and feminine”,<sup>53</sup> performing a range of possibilities within an essentially conservative culture. For Stevenson, however, it is the Bowie concert that is the carnival space; I extend upon this idea in the sense that Bowie and Bolan, and the Otherworlds they presented, were carnivalesque in themselves.

Zaplana (2013) discusses the male body in glam rock, focusing primarily on the 1970s New York scene and therefore analysing Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, and Bowie. While my own work focuses on Bowie within a British context, Zaplana’s work is relevant in that it discusses the ways that Bowie destabilised the conventional

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>51</sup> Nick Stevenson, *David Bowie: Fame, Sound and Vision* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2006), 44.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 60.

hegemonic ideals of masculinity.<sup>54</sup> While she contextualises her discussion in terms of American society and the anti-Vietnam War movement, her argument is still pertinent to my own analysis of Bolan and Bowie as, across the continent the ‘queer’, camp or homosexual body was also framed as ‘Other’ – and as Zaplana notes, this otherness was framed in relation to what she calls “a misogynist anxiety over feminisation”.<sup>55</sup> She also argues that Bowie, Pop and Reed gave visibility to non-conventional sexual identities, subverting norms of masculinity through performing a “cross-dressed body”,<sup>56</sup> and I too take up this notion in chapter three, framing this in terms of the carnivalesque ‘world upside down’.

After most of this thesis had been written, several more books on Bowie (and on glam) were published – and while time and space constraints prevent me from fully delineating all of their contents here, it is important to note that Cinque, Moore and Redmond’s edited collection *Enchanting David Bowie: Space Time Body Memory* (2015) acknowledges Bowie’s transformative, subversive, transgressive significance.<sup>57</sup> This collection encompasses the transformation of ‘Space Oddity’ Major Tom (Lupro, 2015), Ziggy Stardust as a figure of urban alienation (Chapman, 2015), the Bowie ‘chronotope’ (Brooker, 2015), and an exploration of Bowie’s whiteness as the position of privilege *from which he is able* to subvert norms (Redmond, 2015), along with many other post-1970s aspects of Bowie’s persona and cultural output. It is also important to note that Waldrep’s (2015) and Chapman’s (2015) analyses of Bowie also explore Bowie’s subversive Otherness, in particular in relation to gender, sexuality, and identity. Further to this, Chapman and Johnson’s edited collection on glam, *Global Glam and Popular Music: Style and Spectacle from the 1970s to the 2000s* (2016), encompasses the genre’s international reach from the 1970s to the 2000s, including sections on glam in Britain, Europe and North America, Asia, South America and Australasia. Throughout the book, glam’s performance of difference and Otherness is presented

---

<sup>54</sup> Esther Zaplana, ‘Breaking the Mold: Male Rock Performance, Glam, and the (Re-)Imagination of the Male Body in the 1960s and 1970s’, in *Embodying Masculinities: Towards a History of the Male Body in U.S. Culture and Literature*, ed. Josep M Armengol (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 64.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>57</sup> Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond, eds., *Enchanting David Bowie: Space Time Body Memory* (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 2.

as progressive, transformative and counter-hegemonic – including my own contribution (Blair 2016), a discussion of Bolan’s otherworldly persona that is comprised of sections of chapters two and four of this thesis. A version of chapter two of this thesis also appeared in *MEDIANZ: Media Studies Journal of Aotearoa New Zealand*, discussing Bowie and Bolan’s counter-hegemonic personae (Blair 2016). Of the two approaches to glam, as either reactionary or radical, my own research is within the latter category. As such, my approach to the carnivalesque is also aligned with the idea of carnival as *radical critique*, and I will discuss this in the following section.

### **The Carnavalesque: Introduction and Approaches**

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin delineates the defining features of the medieval pre-Lenten carnival: a world upside down in which power relations are inverted gender roles reversed; alternative personae are assumed via the donning of the festival mask; and the grotesque is celebrated through the celebration of the lower bodily stratum and its functions of sex, defecation, birth (and simultaneously, the related bodily functions of eating, drinking and death). Carnival laughter, for Rabelais, is a transgressive force, parodic excess inverting and disrupting existing power relations. The carnival space is one that transgresses all that is hierarchical, hegemonic and oppressive, acting as a ‘social safety valve’ for the masses. That is, whereas the period of Lent is one of solemnity and deprivation, the pre-Lenten carnival period is one of laughter and excess; a ‘letting off of steam’ necessitated by life lived under an oppressive official culture (and yet, sanctioned by that official culture).

For Bakhtin, carnival is a form of ritual spectacle “sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal and political cult forms and ceremonials” in medieval Europe,<sup>58</sup> “the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance”.<sup>59</sup> Most pertinently for our discussion of Bolan and Bowie in context of 1970s Britain, Bakhtin notes that “...

---

<sup>58</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

through all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world. These moments [...] created the peculiar character of the feasts”.<sup>60</sup> Carnival provided temporary liberation from the hegemonic official culture: “it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions”.<sup>61</sup> It also marked the suspension of “conformity to one’s self”<sup>62</sup> via the carnival mask. For Bakhtin, this was of great importance, and in regards to Bolan and Bowie’s ever-metamorphosing ‘stage’ personae, it is also of great importance to my discussion of glam; in particular, in terms of identity play involving the suspension of one’s self. The carnival mask, says Bakhtin, “is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation [and with the] negation of uniformity and similarity [...] transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames”.<sup>63</sup> It is carnival consciousness, Bakhtin argues, that paves the way for change,<sup>64</sup> the lower bodily stratum and its functions (particularly of sex and procreation) are positive forces of renewal, but, these were not forces that could be freely expressed under official ideology.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the reversal or negation of hierarchical roles could only be expressed temporarily, in that carnival moment. However, Bakhtin notes, the temporary nature of this suspension of hierarchies, boundaries and hegemonic rules and roles served to “increase its fantastic nature and utopian radicalism”.<sup>66</sup>

In what follows, I will outline the current, opposing approaches to the carnivalesque: carnival as a temporary social safety valve (that is, the carnivalesque as reactionary); and carnival as transgressive (and therefore as radical). Most pertinent in terms of my own argument, I will also discuss the idea of the radical, politically progressive carnival as a ‘critical utopia’.

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 89.

### ***The Carnavalesque as Reactionary***

Stallybrass and White (2007) argue that carnival has been sublimated and that due to the introduction of the working week, carnival was no longer “temporally” scheduled to a calendar date and so instead it now “erupts” in literature, art, advertisements and popular music.<sup>67</sup> They also state that “carnival was too disgusting for bourgeois life to endure except as sentimental spectacle. Even then, its spectacular identifications could only be momentary, fleeting and partial – voyeuristic glimpses of a promiscuous loss of status and decorum which the bourgeoisie had had to deny as abhorrent in order to emerge as a distinct and ‘proper’ class”.<sup>68</sup> Jenks (2003) notes also the nature of carnival as “a lasting symbol of transgression, release and a general letting off of steam”. Yet while carnival may be “a concept signifying resistance [and] disorder”,<sup>69</sup> Jenks considers the moment of carnival to be a “licensed mayhem”<sup>70</sup> where transgression is not only temporary, but also in that very moment, co-opted, mainstreamed, and ultimately, reaffirms the status quo,<sup>71</sup> in Tikhanov’s (2000) words, this form of utopia being a “dangerously conservative and regressive” one.<sup>72</sup> Eco (1984) also states that “Carnival can exist only as an authorised transgression. [...] It is reserved for certain places or streets. In this sense, comedy and carnival are not instances of real transgression: they represent the paramount examples of law enforcement. They remind us of the existence of the rule”.<sup>73</sup>

### ***The Carnavalesque as Radical***

Stam (1989) takes particular issue with Eco’s position, postulating that his particular contribution does not acknowledge carnival’s “progressive potential”

---

<sup>67</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, ‘Bourgeois Hysteria and the Carnavalesque’, in *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 2010), 105.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Chris Jenks, *Transgression* (London: Routledge, 2003), 161.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 167, 163.

<sup>72</sup> Galin Tikhanov, *The Master and the Slave: Lukacs, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of Their Time* (Oxford University Press, 2000), <http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.ezproxy.otago.ac.nz/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198187257.001.0001/acprof-9780198187257>.

<sup>73</sup> Umberto Eco et al., *Carnival!* (Berlin; New York: Mouton Publishers, 1984), 6.

when in fact it should be viewed as “an ongoing, corporeal, collective practice”<sup>74</sup> and a space where marginality is privileged<sup>75</sup> through a “liberating explosion of otherness”.<sup>76</sup> As “the oppositional culture of the oppressed”,<sup>77</sup> Stam posits that carnival holds both utopian promise and utopian desire.<sup>78</sup> He points out also that “the political limitations of real-life carnival are not necessarily those of carnivalesque strategies in art”;<sup>79</sup> that is, a carnivalesque text, whether it is an artwork, literature, music, film, or any other cultural form, is carnivalesque because it deploys carnivalesque strategies. As such, I would argue, the carnivalesque’s presentation of a transgressive, alternative way of being, its oppositionality, is not necessarily bound by the same ‘official’ restrictions as the (officially sanctioned) day of carnival.

Danow (1995) follows this same line of thinking, distinguishing between the day of carnival as “a concrete cultural manifestation”<sup>80</sup> and the ‘carnivalesque spirit’ embodied within a particular work. Peeren (2008) also argues that Bakhtin’s “aestheticisation of the carnival into the carnivalesque separates it from its historical, social and institutional coordinates”;<sup>81</sup> as such, the carnivalesque elements of glam rock are a response to those historical, social and institutional coordinates particular to Britain in the 1970s, and, I would argue, operating in that same spirit of transgression, otherness, and critical utopianism that Bakhtin attributes to medieval carnival.

Vice (1997) notes that carnival time, being the opposite to a “time of terror and purges”, is characterised by “moments of death and revival, of change and

---

<sup>74</sup> Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 91.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 92, 96.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>80</sup> David Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 3.

<sup>81</sup> Esther Peeren, *Intersubjectivities and Popular Culture: Bakhtin and Beyond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 175.

renewal”<sup>82</sup> and that this renewal “does not occur within the lifetime of an individual carnival subject, but within the body of the people as a whole: birth is always implicit within death”.<sup>83</sup> In this sense, Vice views carnival as both a critique and an agent of renewal and change. Dentith (2004) too notes that carnival is a liberatory space, and that while carnival is seen by some as reinforcing the status quo because of that fact that it is temporary.<sup>84</sup> He notes that “Bakhtin uses ‘utopian’ in a very particular way [...] It is not that carnival looks forward to some distant prospect of social perfection, but that the space of carnival has already realised it”.<sup>85</sup>

The ‘very particular’ sense of utopia that is most pertinent to my argument is that of ‘critical utopia’. Gardiner (1993) posits that Bakhtin’s utopian carnival space is not some means of totalitarian social organisation, and nor is it necessarily future-oriented towards an idealised end-point. Rather it is a critical, counter-hegemonic space. That is, it is an ‘alternate reality’ encompassing “transgressive potentialities”<sup>86</sup> that articulate resistance to the prevailing societal and institutional conditions and power relations. He takes Morson and Emerson (1990) to task on several points, but most importantly, on the issue of how ‘utopia’ may be defined; that is, that the idea of utopia as a “static, reified object of a perfectly passive society”<sup>87</sup> is one that Bakhtin himself was suspicious of, and hence, not the ‘utopia’ that we find expressed in cultural forms and practices that we define as ‘carnavalesque’. Folk culture, Gardiner notes, holds “the promise of a renewal of humankind on a more egalitarian and radically democratic basis, through the creation of a utopian sphere of abundance and freedom”.<sup>88</sup> The fact that the nature of carnival is temporary, that the inversion of hierarchies and the breaking of taboos take place only within that carnival space and not ‘out there’ in

---

<sup>82</sup> Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester, UK; New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 1997), 152.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>84</sup> Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 73.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>86</sup> Michael Gardiner, ‘Prosaics and Carnival’, in *Critiques of Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2000), 30.

<sup>87</sup> Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 56.

<sup>88</sup> Gardiner, ‘Prosaics and Carnival’, 33.

everyday life, Gardiner argues, “increased its fantastic nature and utopian radicalism”.<sup>89</sup> He outlines the major elements of ‘critical utopia’ that are present within the idea of carnival as follows. Firstly, its “critical function”. That is, the critical utopia takes an oppositional stance in regards to the present social formation and, allowing us to see alternative solutions to present-day problems, and to “visualise alternative solutions to the ‘festering problems of the present’”.<sup>90</sup> Gardiner also notes that carnivalesque inversion can, in its subversive nature, help us to ‘reconstruct the present’.<sup>91</sup> Gardiner also notes that much like Jameson, Bakhtin is critical of utopias that celebrate a mythological past; the epic, for Bakhtin (like the fantasy novel for Jameson), is a ‘conservative utopia’ in that its narrative form legitimates the existing order and that its utopian images are “authoritative symbols” that “serve official interests”.<sup>92</sup> Carnival on the other hand, intends to disrupt this. Gardiner’s next major point is that carnival is reflexive: in laughing at itself, it refuses the totalising nature of conservative utopia; furthermore, carnival is not merely an ‘escapist daydream’ but in exposing the “contradictions and antagonisms” in society, it is something that threatens to disrupt; it is an enactment of a possible alternative.<sup>93</sup> Finally, he argues that Bakhtin’s linking of counter-hegemonic thought or ideological criticism with “some conception of an alternative (and more desirable) state of affairs” is a necessity in the realisation of a change in the existing social order.<sup>94</sup>

The utopianism inherent in Bakhtin, says Gardiner, is “a counter-hegemonic impulse which operates through the anticipatory projection of a transformed social world, one that can only be completely realised at the risk of its own negation. It is about the opening-up of possibilities, an ‘education of desire’ which cannot be prefigured beforehand, but only furtively glimpsed in what Bloch called the ‘darkness of the immediately experienced moment’”.<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 43.

The split between high and low glam as characterised by rock critics is a useful one in terms of drawing out the carnivalesque features of the genre.<sup>96</sup> That is, where high glam is characterised by elements of the carnivalesque such as mask, androgyny and the subversion of established ‘norms’, as well as enacting an escape from the present-day reality, it cannot be said to engage much with the idea of carnival laughter. However, it is low glam that openly enacts a parodic, comedic humour by exaggeration of these aforementioned features (particularly in terms of androgyny), that high glam established as hallmarks of the genre. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore the glam genre as a whole, the ways in which high and low glam function as different expressions of the carnivalesque is a topic for further exploration, and this is something I intend to do in future scholarly work. It may be said however, that glam, and particularly in the case of Bowie and Bolan, may be read as a carnivalesque ‘space’ reflecting contemporary concerns and transformations. That is, it acknowledges, while also providing a form of critical escapism from, increasingly unpalatable social and economic conditions and the emerging ‘dystopian’ discourses of the contemporary moment. Much like Stam, Gardiner (2000) observes that “Bakhtin alerts us to the very phenomenon of difference or ‘otherness’, and the moral imperative behind its nurturing and preservation”.<sup>97</sup> This is most important when it comes to what I will argue is glam’s expression of carnivalesque ‘otherness’, by the presentation of alternative identities, alternative sexualities, and alternative realities. All of this plays out in the work of David Bowie and Marc Bolan through these artists’ drawing upon the generic features of science fiction and fantasy, both acting as critical expressions of a utopian desire for escape and for radical change.

In the following chapters, I will discuss these various ‘alternatives’ in the work of Bolan and Bowie as expressions of the carnival elements of mask, the ‘world

---

<sup>96</sup> Susan Fast, in her study of Led Zeppelin (2001), In *The Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music*, briefly utilises the concept of the carnivalesque in order to explain why Led Zeppelin had (by and large) been excluded from the ‘serious’ rock canon – their raw immediacy, their excessiveness, and their music and performance’s orientation toward the ‘lower bodily stratum’, she argues, excluded the band from being considered among rock’s ‘elite’. My own thoughts on glam and its expression of the carnivalesque follow similar reasoning – in that the genre’s mass appeal is due to its carnivalesque elements (and even more so in the case of ‘low’ glam).

<sup>97</sup> Gardiner, ‘Prosaics and Carnival’, 70.

upside down' and the lower bodily stratum, and through alternative, carnivalesque spaces. First, in chapter two, I will explore the ways that Bolan and Bowie presented alternate, otherworldly identities as an expression of the carnival mask; and further, the ways that these identities trouble and destabilise the notion of an 'authentic', fixed identity. Following this, in chapter three I will discuss the ways that Bolan and Bowie troubled conservative notions of gender and sexuality, presenting a carnivalesque 'world upside down' that brought attention to, in Bakhtin's terms, the 'lower bodily stratum'. Finally, in chapter four, I will examine the carnivalesque spaces – the 'alternate realities' – that Bolan and Bowie's alternate identities inhabited. Further to this, throughout my argument I will demonstrate that these alternate identities, alternate genders and sexualities, and alternate realities represented a carnivalesque, collective desire for transcendence from the otherwise unpalatable social, economic and political conditions of nascent late capitalism that had manifested in 1970s Britain – and, from the conservatism of mainstream, hegemonic British society.

## Chapter Two

### 'Alternate Personae': Bolan, Bowie and the Carnival Mask

#### The Carnival Mask, Identity and 'Authenticity'

For Bakhtin, the carnival mask is linked with the idea of the social safety valve. As carnival participants adopt personae that are radically different to their everyday selves, they transcend everyday reality and its power relations, and the ways in which those power relations are enacted. Further, in carnival "the mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity",<sup>98</sup> rejecting conformity and celebrating difference. As Bakhtin argues, "it rejects conformity to oneself"<sup>99</sup>, or, how identity is performed in public. That is, the mask represents the notion of an alternate persona, and one that is ephemeral, existing in the liminal space of carnival. The mask, additionally, is "related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles".<sup>100</sup> As such, the mask is also transgressive, transformative, performative, and counter-hegemonic. These physical expressions of personae – of identity – are integral to the notion of the carnivalesque; and as such, we can argue that Bolan and Bowie's adoption of alternative personae are an expression of the carnival mask – a counter-hegemonic, subversive challenge to notions of 'authenticity', truth, and any sense of fixity in regards to the notion of 'identity'.

In this chapter then, I will discuss Bolan and Bowie's alternative personae as a means of carnivalesque, counter-hegemonic challenge. In doing so, I will elaborate in terms of the notions of identity and 'authenticity', and the ways in which Bolan and Bowie play with 'truth' or the notion of 'authentic identity', troubling any coherent claims to such. The central concern of this chapter is that Bolan and

---

<sup>98</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 39.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 40.

Bowie challenge the notion of authenticity, and the norms of everyday reality, through their strategies: that is, they did so through adopting alternate personae, and sometimes contradictory viewpoints or ideological positions that challenged the idea of 'telling the truth'. As such, their adopted personae, or identities, were ephemeral, liminal, and deliberately and obviously 'artificial', challenging the music scene's dominant, hegemonic privileging of the notion of authenticity – as I will discuss in the next section. These 'artificial', 'inauthentic' personae were also fantastical and otherworldly, and transgressive in terms of their representation of gender and sexuality; and so, I will discuss the idea of the 'fantastical Other' and transgressive Otherness as a negation of the uniformity of the dominant, hegemonic culture, wherein Bolan and Bowie presented themselves/their personae as radical Others, representing an alternative, carnivalesque, counter-hegemonic way of being, far removed from everyday life in 1970s Britain. As such, this chapter discusses Bolan and Bowie's otherworldly personae and introduces the ways that these 'alien' personae intertwine with notions of gender and sexuality – which I will elaborate on further in chapter three.

In terms of what constitutes 'mask', then, our definition takes into account Bakhtin's assertion that "... such manifestations as parodies, caricatures, grimaces, eccentric postures, and comic gestures are per se derived from the mask".<sup>101</sup> Auslander also notes that rock music personae are enacted not just in musical performances but through the packaging, promotional materials, and press coverage of music artists.<sup>102</sup> If we take the notion of 'mask' then, to include these arenas of 'performance', and if we also include visual aspects such as clothing, cosmetics, physical gesture, mannerism, and vocal affectation, then the mask is highly nuanced, complex, and theatrical on many levels. In terms of the last aspect that I mention here - vocal affectation, which is particularly relevant for not only Bolan and Bowie, but other glam artists such as Bryan Ferry of Roxy Music<sup>103</sup> and Steve Harley of Cockney Rebel, Barthes' concept of 'the grain of the voice' is

---

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Philip Auslander, 'Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14, no. 1 (2004): 9.

<sup>103</sup> For further discussion of Bryan Ferry's vocal stylisations, see Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 150–192.

pertinent: that is, the voice, in music, is in “dual production”<sup>104</sup> of linguistic communication and musical expression – in short, the way that a performer uses their voice both contributes aesthetically to the piece of music, and at the same time *signifies meaning*. For our purposes in discussing Bolan and Bowie’s personae, this meaning coalesces around, and generates, the production of a performed identity. Certainly, Bolan’s distinctive vibrato, punctuated with yelps, whineys and rasps, form easily identifiable aspects of the Bolan persona, as well as adding to the aural aesthetic of his music – and I will discuss this further in chapter four, in particular regard to Bolan’s ‘alternative reality’ or ‘fantasy Otherworld’ – an extension of his personae as radical, fantastical Other. Before addressing the idea of the radical Other, however, I will elaborate on the ways in which Bolan and Bowie use the notion of ‘personae’ to challenge the notion of authenticity.

### **Challenging ‘Authenticity’: Ephemeral Identities**

As Auslander notes, glam was a backlash against not just the counter-culture or the musical style of progressive rock, and also not merely against the visual style of those previous genres and their associated subcultures – but it was also a backlash against the discourses of ‘authenticity’ that were embedded in the codes and practices of those music genres and subcultures. And as Waldrep points out, Bowie’s (and by extension glam’s) challenge to the notion of identity was a deliberate move to explicitly reject rock history’s privileging of the ‘authentic artist’.<sup>105</sup> The singer-songwriter, the blues-based rock band, progressive rock groups, or the denim-clad folk-rocker are all examples of this. The lineup at 1969’s Woodstock Festival serves as an example of the way in which rock music’s pre-glam period privileged these types of artists. Among the featured artists at Woodstock were: Arlo Guthrie, Melanie, Joan Baez; the Grateful Dead; Creedence Clearwater Revival; Janis Joplin; The Band; Johnny Winter; Jimi Hendrix; Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. In Britain, the 1971 Glastonbury Fair festival featured (along with pre-glam Bowie) Fairport Convention, Hawkwind, and both Melanie and Joan Baez. The Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd also occupied positions of ‘rock

---

<sup>104</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Grain of the Voice’, in *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 181.

<sup>105</sup> Shelton Waldrep, *The Aesthetics of Self-Invention: Oscar Wilde to David Bowie* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 106.

privilege', as had the Beatles. These artists positioned themselves as *themselves* – as fixed, stable identities that produced 'authentic' music.

However, in accordance with Frith<sup>106</sup> and Auslander, I follow the line of argument that any artist's pop music performance has in operation three different layers: the 'real person', the performance persona, and the character being performed.<sup>107</sup> For example, T. Rex's song 'Jeepster' involves a main character who is a metaphorical "jeepster" and also a "vampire" – however, this character exists only within the world of the song, and the primal lusts of that character are not necessarily expressed in other T. Rex songs, except through other characters; similarly, 'The Slider' is a character in its own song, that we do not necessarily think is autobiographical, but rather a *character* who is performed via the Marc Bolan persona. Furthermore, and as the primary point of departure from the aforementioned artists, Bolan and Bowie deliberately constructed alternate personae, or rather, alternative identities that are both ephemeral and liminal in nature – ephemerality and liminality being distinctive elements of the carnivalesque. In essence, we can think of these ephemeral identities as being a procession of masks that undermine any sense of stability or fixity of identity – and, expressing the carnivalesque notion of death and rebirth, wherein the old is replaced with the new, the hegemonic with the counter-hegemonic, the status quo with the radical.

Firstly, we need to consider the double negative that operates in regard to Bolan and Bowie's performance personae and the way that this challenges the idea of 'authenticity'. While both artists are known most predominantly for their personae as Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, the Thin White Duke, the 'Bopping Elf', the 'Warlock of Love', and Zinc Alloy, we should also note that 'Marc Bolan' and 'David Bowie' are in themselves adopted personae. The 'real people' behind these personae are David Jones and Mark Feld, who adopted their chosen 'stage names'. Already they had reinvented their respective images first as mods, and then as

---

<sup>106</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 212, cited in Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 4.

<sup>107</sup> Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 4.

counter-cultural 'folk'/hippie musicians. Bolan had also performed with mod rock group John's Children, who briefly toured with The Who in 1967. Upon adopting their performance personae of 'David Bowie' and 'Marc Bolan', both artists then adopted further personae on top of these. Auslander notes that assumed professional names ('Bolan' and 'Bowie') come to signify what audiences believe is *the real person*. However as Auslander also notes, "David Bowie is not David Jones, yet he is also not *not* David Jones, as suggested by the fact that the name David Bowie belongs now both to the real person and the performance persona".<sup>108</sup> This is the first of several ways that Bolan and Bowie challenge the idea of authentic identity. Furthermore, as Auslander also notes and as we will see in relation to the ways in which Bolan and Bowie present themselves as fantastical Others, interviews and media appearances can reflect the performer's persona moreso than they reflect the performer's 'authentic' personality.<sup>109</sup> As such, I will draw upon resources such as press and television interviews in the latter part of this chapter, in order to demonstrate Bolan and Bowie's performance in this area.

In addition to Auslander's double negative, Bowie in particular draws deliberate attention to his own inauthenticity – to his own carnival mask. In saying, "I packaged a totally credible plastic rock star – much better than any sort of Monkees fabrication... My plastic rocker was much more plastic than anybody's",<sup>110</sup> Bowie rejects not only the counter-cultural hippie music scene, but also the previously dominant forms of rock music and *their* attendant discourses of authenticity, as well as drawing attention to – and privileging – the 'inauthentic' nature of pop music and the media industry. From presenting himself as the alien Ziggy Stardust, to representing himself as half-man, half-dog on the LP cover for *Diamond Dogs*, then, Bowie's play with identity becomes increasingly 'inauthentic' (in the sense that it does not make a claim to 'reality'), and therefore increasingly radical. Aladdin Sane, claimed Bowie, was not even necessarily a *person*: "Ziggy was meant to be clearly-cut and well defined with areas for interplay, whereas Aladdin is pretty ephemeral. He's also a situation as opposed to just being an

---

<sup>108</sup> Auslander, 'Performance Analysis and Popular Music', 6–7.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>110</sup> Cameron Crowe, 'David Bowie: Ground Control to Davy Jones', *Rolling Stone*, 12 February 1976, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/ground-control-to-davy-jones-19760212>.

individual. I think he encompasses situations as well as being just a personality". This idea, of an identity – a mask – being a *situation* rather than a personality is a direct challenge to the idea of identity itself. Waldrep notes that this increasingly radical, constant metamorphosis alienated Bowie's earlier middle-class audience,<sup>111</sup> and in this sense we can consider his radicalism to have been particularly successful in terms of challenging and disrupting hegemonic notions of identity and claims to an authentic self. This challenge to the notion of 'authentic identity' is also expressed in the ephemerality of Bolan and Bowie's personae. The constant changing of personae, including the 'killing off' of identities, serves to trouble any coherent claims to such. Furthermore, the death and rebirth of Bolan and Bowie through new, replacement personae, is in itself a carnivalesque refusal to remain static – the constantly changing, ephemeral nature of their identities, is indicative of the counter-hegemonic, carnivalesque process of reproduction and renewal – a process that in effect refuses the status quo. Bakhtin argues that "the birth of the new, of the greater and the better, is as indispensable and as inevitable as the death of the old. The one is transferred to the other, the better turns the worse into ridicule and kills it".<sup>112</sup> Death, birth and renewal – the 'death' of Ziggy Stardust and the 'birth' of Aladdin Sane at the end of Bowie's *Ziggy Stardust* tour, then, represents a carnivalesque looking to the future – leaving behind the old for the new, in a process of death and renewal. Bolan too, left behind one identity for another: making the switch from acoustic, counter-cultural hippie to the 'Electric Warrior', from mystical elf to warlock, reincarnated bard and teen idol, to his self-repositioning as soul singer – and in his 1975 performances of 'Dreamy Lady' on television shows *Supersonic* and *Tiswas*, to proto-goth.<sup>113</sup>

Moreover, Bolan and Bowie expressly challenged notions of authenticity in terms of how they presented themselves in the press – Bowie deliberately shifting his ideological positions and sexual identit(ies), and Bolan telling increasingly outlandish, fantastical stories. In 1975, Bowie stated that "the best thing that can

---

<sup>111</sup> Waldrep, *The Aesthetics of Self-Invention*, 106.

<sup>112</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 256.

<sup>113</sup> In these performances, Bolan appears with white face makeup, dark eyeshadow and teased hair; his style is very similar to that of Siouxi Sioux, a self-proclaimed Bolan fan. Siouxi and the Banshees were formed in 1976.

happen is for an extreme right government to come”,<sup>114</sup> and in 1976 that he believed “very strongly in fascism”,<sup>115</sup> yet in 1977 he claimed to be “closer to communism”,<sup>116</sup> and later that year, that he’d “made two or three glib, theatrical observations on English society, and the only thing I can now counter with is to state that [...] I’m apolitical”.<sup>117</sup> In fact, he stated, he “made things up”.<sup>118</sup> Firstly, the shock value of his apparent adoption of extreme political ideologies ran counter to what we might term the more moderate political views of ‘polite society’ – the declaration of his alignment with fascism, while on the surface does not seem at all carnivalesque but rather an alignment with oppression, functioned, ironically, as a shock tactic, a scandalous irruption, and furthermore, was confounded in its authenticity as Bowie’s position shifted several times, before he revealed that none of it at all was authentic. Similarly, Bowie’s shifting identification with homosexuality and bisexuality functioned in the same way – he claimed to be gay, and then bisexual,<sup>119</sup> and confoundingly, that he had never had a bisexual experience in his life – “that was just a lie”<sup>120</sup> – again, undercutting any sense of authentic sexual identity. Bolan, on the other hand, engaged in relating increasingly fantastical ‘supernatural’ stories – ones that could not even reasonably be believed. Bolan hinted heavily at the actual existence of ‘The Wizard’ from the song of the same name, and would detail the time he spent in Paris with the ‘magician’, during which, rituals were performed including the crucifixion of cats.<sup>121</sup> Another fantastical story that Bolan wove in the press was of a dinosaur he had drawn that came to life: “I knew I was doing it. I knew my imagination had brought it to life. I also knew afterwards that had I not stopped looking at it, it would’ve destroyed me. The tyrannosaurus would have eaten me and there

---

<sup>114</sup> Barry Miles, *Bowie In His Own Words* (London: W.H. Allen, 1982), 124.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 126–127.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 37–38.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 40–41.

<sup>121</sup> It is now generally accepted among the Bolan fan community that the ‘wizard’ was a man by the name of Riggs O’Hara, who the young Bolan may have spent a weekend with and alongside whom read some esoteric books.

would've been blood on the bed". Bolan's wife, June Child, "[swore] she heard it breathing".<sup>122</sup>

These claims, as I have said, cannot even reasonably be expected to be 'authentic' – and as such, they form a part of Bolan's self-positioning as a 'fantastical Other'. The next section explores this idea of the 'fantastical Other' in more depth, particularly in regards to how this self-positioning works as a complex expression of the carnival mask for both Bolan and Bowie.

### **The 'Fantastical Other': Aliens, Magicians, and Transgressive Otherness**

The fact that Bolan and Bowie's most prominent glam personae – or masks – were alien and/or supernatural, fantasy figures is worth further exploring. These particular incarnations of Bolan and Bowie are counter-hegemonic in particularly carnivalesque ways, most pertinently in terms of a radical escapism from present-day (or, more correctly, British 1970s) reality, and again, directly challenging notions of authenticity – as we have already noted in regards to Bolan's fantastical storytelling in the press. Bowie's glam period is most readily identified with the science fiction, alien character 'Ziggy Stardust', while Bolan's is linked with both his pre-glam 'hippie' image and its attendant associations with literary fantasy, as well as science fiction imagery. His self-positioning as magical elf and warlock is distinctly Tolkienesque, representing an escape from everyday reality, while his self-association with occult magick runs counter to the dominant, religious discourses of traditional Christian denominations. Furthermore, Bowie's alien mask is linked with the notion of the radical Other – a figure representing an alternative to everyday ways of being, standing in for the 'unknowable', and, as McLeod argues, representing marginalised identities. In this case, this 'marginality' being the expression of alternative, non-mainstream sexualities.

---

<sup>122</sup> Michael Thomas, 'T.Rex Is Gonna Fuck You Into the Mick Jagger Gap', *Rolling Stone*, 16 March 1972, 34.

### **‘Otherness’ as a Challenge to Authenticity and as ‘Social Safety Valve’**

I have already noted the way that Bolan’s association with the fantasy realm, and his increasingly improbable stories, presented a challenge to the notion of authenticity. This ‘Otherness’, and its subversion of authenticity, is even further pronounced in the case of Bowie’s alien persona. As McLeod notes,

Typically, futuristic or alien personification and representation by popular musicians [...] actively subvert and negate notions of authenticity. These artists often consciously place their own identities in question through the creation of new mythologies, typically achieved by masking themselves in costume, alter egos, aliases and faceless technologies. By employing metaphors of space, alien beings or futurism, metaphors that are by definition unknowable, such artists and works constantly ‘differ’ the notion of ‘authentic’ identity. In this manner, the use of an alien aesthetic functions analogously to a camp aesthetic that subverts claim to artistic privilege or autonomy.<sup>123</sup>

Accordingly, Bowie’s repeated use of alien and futuristic personae contribute towards a ‘rock star mythology’ in which Bowie presents himself not just as ‘the performer David Bowie’, but as a mythological, chameleon-like figure donning mask after mask. An early example of Bowie’s play with alien identities can be seen in the single ‘Space Oddity’. Within this song, Bowie switches between personae, from ‘Ground Control’ to the song’s main character – Major Tom, a *2001*-esque astronaut who, it may be argued, signifies a futuristic otherness through the isolation and unfamiliar experience of space travel; human technology, however, is not yet infallible and severs Major Tom’s connection with Earth, distancing him not just physically but now metaphysically as well as he drifts in the unknowable experience of outer space (by contrast, Ziggy Stardust brings the unknowable to Earth, in a form of rock n’ roll messianism). Post-Ziggy Stardust, Bowie’s character of ‘Aladdin Sane’ (from the album of the same name), and Bowie’s casting in the film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, build upon his radically distanced, ‘alien’ persona.

---

<sup>123</sup> Ken McLeod, ‘Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism and Meaning in Popular Music’, *Popular Music* 22, no. 03 (October 2003): 339.

A notable sequence in Bowie's video for 'John, I'm Only Dancing' comprises three different close ups of Bowie in quick succession. Temporally disjunctive, they break up and denaturalise the action - Bowie is seen first facing the camera, then slightly turned to the left (faint smoke in the air above his shoulder to the right), and then completely turned to the left, his face further obscured by shadow (the smoke now behind him to his left), as he holds his hand up to the camera, turns his back, and then coolly turns around again. This has the effect of distancing the viewer further from any 'naturalised' sense of the person 'David Bowie', and places him even more so in the role of alien 'Other'. Another instance of this disorienting, temporal disjunction occurs in the video, where this time he is again mostly obscured in darkness, seen first in close up and front on, then moving from left to right, from the right towards back, left towards the front, right towards the back again and so on until he is seen front on again. During the guitar outro, we again see a close-up of Bowie's face and this time he turns from the left towards the front, exhaling smoke from his nostrils. Finally, during the guitar outro sequence of the video, Bowie is seen in close up again and chiaroscuro-lit. He moves toward and then away from the camera in a play of seeming curiosity versus receding back into the darkness. This is intercut at the very end with the initial off-centre long shots of him posed with a guitar on his back; his pose is of casual confidence, leg bent and hip outwards, completely static. These intercut shots juxtapose the two aspects of Bowie's 'persona' for this video - 'cool' alien rock star, and the curious but hesitant alien being - in both instances, distant, 'Other', and untouchable.

Bowie's 'Life On Mars' video is also notable for the way it represents Bowie as a distant alien figure. As a non-narrative video, with no props to express the meaning of the song, what is primarily communicated in 'Life On Mars' is Bowie's *appearance*. Much of the way he is presented here is through fragmented views in extreme close-up, the camera focusing on particular elements of his physical attributes and costuming - thereby emphasising his alien-like androgyny, and henceforth, his Otherness. During the piano introduction, we see a white screen. As the vocals begin, the camera pans down to reveal the top of Bowie's bright orange hair, and then down to his eyes (which we see in extreme close-up). The entire eye socket is painted with bright blue eyeshadow, his mismatched eyes the focus of the

shot.<sup>124</sup> The high-key lighting renders his nose (apart from the nostrils) almost invisible, merged with the rest of his face. His mouth is clearly defined, and it is obvious that he is wearing lipstick. The high visibility of his makeup links him with the 'feminine' and the androgynous, while the video's high levels of visual artifice emphasise the artificiality and Otherness of his persona. As the song progresses, there is a cut to a medium shot of Bowie, so we can now see that he is sharply dressed in a bright blue suit, which has been tailored to accentuate the lines of his body. The jacket is long-line, and tailored to the waist. He wears a white-collared shirt, which has vertical black and white stripes from the collar down, and he is also wearing a wide white tie with a diagonal red stripe, and black and white panels and patterning. The colour of his suit matches his eyeshadow, but offsets the colour of his hair, and contrasts with the bright white of his face (which matches the white on his tie). The bright colours and high-key lighting, then, emphasise Bowie's unusual, and highly stylised, 'artificial' appearance.

Throughout the video, long shots of his body alternate with extreme close-ups of parts of his face. The camera pans across his eyes, and then dissolves into a pan down from the top of his head to his eyes again. This focus on specific, fragmented parts of his face, the shots dissolving into each other, increases in frequency as the song reaches its orchestral climax. The climactic drums are matched with fragmented freeze-frame shots of his eyes, lips, the left eye, and his lips. Finally, there is a cut to a long shot of Bowie's body, as he turns to the side, swinging his arm as the song ends. There is a cut to a high-angled shot as a ghostly piano refrain plays. Bowie mimes the action of piano playing. There is then a cut to a close-up of him, but this time viewed side-on, as he continues the mime. There is then another cut, to him in long shot, looking down and to the side before he dissolves out of shot to white. The effect here is ethereal, fragmented, highly artificial, and distancing – all of this emphasising Bowie's 'inauthentic', 'alien Other' persona. In addition to this expression of Otherness being a challenge to the notion of authenticity, it also represents a respite from everyday reality – in effect, acting as a carnivalesque social safety valve. If the represented personae are 'inauthentic',

---

<sup>124</sup> Bowie has one pupil considerably larger than the other, and this is a result of an injury that he sustained as a result of being punched in the eye at age 14. The effect of this, when seen in close up, is strikingly 'strange' and contributes to his 'alien' image.

and if they are not of the 'everyday', then they represent an alternative way of being. I will explore this further in relation to Bolan and Bowie's 'Otherworlds' in chapter four, but first, I will discuss Bolan's 'magic', 'mystical' public persona as an alternative identity, and as an alternative to the realities of contemporary life.

Speaking to television's *Music in the Round* host Humphrey Burton in 1971 about where he gathered the words and imagery for his poetry book *The Warlock of Love*, Bolan stated: "I really don't know. I personally believe, you know, I was ... [in] a previous life or something. A previous incarnation. I was some sort of bard or something. Most of the things I write about are descriptions of places I've obviously never been to. And most of the words I write you can't find in any dictionary anyway". Implying, then, that his words are channeled from another lifetime or some sort of alternative reality, Bolan positions himself as having access to a supernatural realm, outside of the everyday – a realm having nothing to do with the realities of unemployment, industrial action or IRA bombings. Similarly, on *Pop Quest*, host Steve Merike introduces Bolan by making reference to his magic powers: "He's threatened to do the most outrageous things to me, so if you see anything disappearing, you'll know it's Marc". Magic, and Bolan's other such 'supernatural powers' are an ever-present, dominant aspect of his persona. Although at the stage of *Electric Warrior* and *The Slider* the pastoral and pagan elements had begun to subside in Bolan's music and lyrical content (with sci fi themes becoming more prominent), they remained at the fore of his media image through television interviews and in the popular press. Interviewed in 1970 about his method of songwriting, Bolan stated:

There are magic mists within certain chords. You play a C major chord and I hear twenty-five melodies and symphonies up here. I've just got to pull one out. [At this point he demonstrates by singing a spontaneous melody]. Just anything, it's all there. There's no strain, it just gushes out.<sup>125</sup>

The reference to 'magic mists' implies, firstly, that there is a supernatural origin to not just Bolan's music, but to music in general. The statement that he hears

---

<sup>125</sup> *T. Rex On TV*, DVD (Warner Music Vision, 2006).

melodies and symphonies with ‘no strain’ implies his own special link with these ethereal ‘magic mists’, and implies that it is not Bolan himself who writes the music but that he is channeling it from a higher, supernatural or ‘magic’ source. What he is stating here links with further interviews Bolan gave during the same period, where he attributes his songwriting to his guardian angel and to the Greek god Pan.<sup>126</sup>

The most blatant links between Bolan and occult magick, and firmly consolidating his ‘initiate’ persona, are made in a 1972 interview for *Rolling Stone* magazine:

When he starts talking about spells and magic and raising the Egyptian gods from their timeless vaults and invoking our elementary planetary heritage, Bolan’s not just swimming about in a lot of low camp acid flashes and King’s Road occult. He’s talking about deep forbidden lore. He spent two of his teenage years living with a black magician in Paris and he keeps pretty quiet about what went on except that there were a lot of books to read, a lot of spells to learn, a lot of mysterious comings and goings in the dead of night that provoke sinister imaginings of Crowley and H.P. Lovecraft – mad Faustus like Charles Dexter Ward bawling terrifying invocations at the sky and raising the goblins. Bolan’s not fooling around here.<sup>127</sup>

In the next paragraph, Bolan outlines a spell he had planned to carry out, in order to turn himself into a satyr. As Bolan then proceeds to invoke the Egyptian god Thoth, the author continues:

... cultivate your hallucinations and cellular promptings, and you can just sit and meditate and zero in on the spirit, just like Marc’s doing right now, sitting by the slow Pacific surf at Malibu in the noonday Christmas sun, calling on old Thoth – his arms reaching out and his eyes jammed shut and his body starting to quiver and now these harsh adenoidal murmurings and bloody screams – he stopped just in time. It was hard to

---

<sup>126</sup> See Mark Paytress, *Bolan: The Rise and Fall of a 20th Century Superstar* (London: Omnibus, 2002), 115.

<sup>127</sup> Thomas, ‘T.Rex Is Gonna Fuck You Into the Mick Jagger Gap’, 32.

tell if the distinct shiver I felt was a gust from the tombs  
or just the full force of Bolan's madness.<sup>128</sup>

Bolan is then quoted: "I want to walk upon the galaxies. I want to hold the oceans in my hand. Many people say, yes, very poetic – a magician means he wants to hold the oceans in his hand. End of story".<sup>129</sup>

Further demonstrating what we are to take as Bolan's in-depth knowledge of esoteric or mystical lore, he then explains that an "elphin creature" was:

... a spiritual creature seven foot tall who had transcended the body, but had remained on earth. He was a different makeup. We're all from different planets, right, perhaps he was a Venusian or something, whatever, from a far off galaxy. Elphin creatures are not two-inch fey creatures: they're very powerful scientific sorcerers. They're not around much anymore because they can't survive in this atmosphere.<sup>130</sup>

Bolan is constructing himself here as an initiate with a wealth of knowledge of a fantastical unseen world and the secrets of the cosmos – albeit a particularly outlandish and 'inauthentic' cosmos of sci fi, fantasy and folklore combined.

Even the manner in which Bolan expresses himself vocally constructs him as a fantastical Other. This aspect of his mask – the 'grain of his voice', to paraphrase Barthes – involves a form of enunciation that is atypical of modern English, and which oftentimes veers into the animalistic – a vocal/aural reverse anthropomorphism. This unconventional vocal style separates Bolan's persona from the 'everyday'. Other aspects of his vocal style include a shrill vibrato that punctuates many of the lines within a song, an overtly fluidic manner of running words together (particularly when those words are already defamiliarised by way of unexpected juxtaposition – that is, by placing them in unexpected relation to other known words and to Bolan's own *invented* words, rendering them almost nonsensical), and the repetition of phonetic sounds and syllables. One pertinent

---

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 34.

example is the song 'Salamanda Palaganda' from the album *Prophets, Seers and Sages, the Angels of the Ages* (1968). Firstly, the 'salamander' is a creature associated with alchemy and the occult in relation to the element of fire, and so it is clear here that Bolan is drawing upon esoteric thought (even if only superficially). Secondly, he has placed this word 'Salamanda' alongside his own nonsense word 'Palaganda', presumably for rhyming effect but also to convey a sense of linguistic unconventionality.<sup>131</sup> The song itself refers to a blue palomino, which of course is an entirely fictional animal, as well as to the following tongue-twisting scenario: "An old crone squirms upon a cushion/Made from Madras silk and satin/Her steel eyes hold a scimitar passion/For the skull hewn in Scarlatti fashion". Apart from being a description of one of Bolan's many song 'characters', the alliteration of these lines allows Bolan to demonstrate a kind of linguistic 'prowess', albeit an unconventional and idiosyncratic one, as he sings the lines. He then slurs the repetitive sounds of the phrase "Parisian z-z-z-z-zoo", followed by an unusual, high-pitched and bird-like "too-wit-too-woo" vocalisation. Finally, towards the end of the song he can be heard repetitively vocalising the sound of a whinnying horse. Bolan's connection with the pastoral, the anthropomorphic (and its reverse) and by extension, the pagan, is something that I will return to in chapter four in regards to the fantasy Otherworld.

Bolan's alleged connection to the supernatural realm has, by way of posthumous documentaries, been further reiterated by interviewees such as former manager Simon Napier-Bell and friend and fellow glam artist Steve Harley, further adding to the 'mythology' surrounding Bolan as a 'magical figure'. Both Napier-Bell and Harley have spoken of Bolan's premonitions of his own premature death, as did Bolan himself. Noting that Bolan was a fan of James Dean, Napier-Bell stated that Bolan said in 1966 that if he died in a car crash, "I'd have to die in a mini". Bolan did die in a mini. Napier-Bell added, "It was an extraordinary thing to happen".<sup>132</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Bolan's tendency to create his own nonsense words is indicative of his engagement with the work of Lewis Carroll – particularly the poem 'Jabberwocky' from *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), itself composed of mostly nonsense words arranged in logical-sounding English grammar. Bolan employed this technique, albeit to a lesser degree, in his songwriting. In Bolan's film *Born to Boogie* (1972), his engagement with Lewis Carroll is made explicit in the 'Mad Hatter's Tea Party' scene.

<sup>132</sup> *T. Rex On TV*.

Singer Billy Idol, interviewed for the same documentary, refers to Bolan's fall from the stage during the last recorded episode of his television show *Marc* as a "premonition" of his death. Steve Harley, speaking of Bolan's response to Elvis Presley's death, states, "Elvis dies. We were at dinner and he said, 'I'd hate to go now. Imagine, I'd only get a paragraph on page three". At this point, Harley's facial expression is incredulous. "Word for word", he adds, emphasising the link between Bolan's words and the reality of his death soon after.<sup>133</sup> The idea that Bolan foresaw his own death has since become an integral part of his posthumous media 'image', consolidating his persona as a magical, supernaturally-inclined figure. Stories of Bolan visiting the Louvre and being transfixed by the Magritte painting '16<sup>th</sup> Septembre' (the date of Bolan's death) have not been verified, but, along with interview accounts such as the ones I have outlined here, form part of his mysterious, magical, posthumous mythology.<sup>134</sup> More recently, Bolan has been caricatured in the *House of Rock* cartoon series (UK, 2000) as a fey, poetry-spouting, spellcasting hippie. This is an interesting point to consider in regards to his magical persona, in the sense that it was these *particular* attributes that were chosen to represent him in the series – as opposed to, for example, any number of his other 'masks', such as 'posing rock guitarist', teen idol, satin and glitter-wearing androgyne, or sexually-extroverted stage performer. It could be said that these attributes, despite their origin in Bolan's earlier, countercultural phase, are the ones that most readily identify him – even though he is most widely known and acknowledged as an androgynous glam rocker.

### **Otherness as a Challenge to Heteronormativity**

Bolan and Bowie's 'Otherness' is counter-hegemonic not only in terms of its challenge to authenticity and the norms of everyday reality, but also in terms of its challenge to normative gender and sexuality. As McLeod suggests in his broad study of alien imagery in rock music, these 'Others' offer an alternative,

---

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Although unverified, this rumour persists among online Bolan fan communities. See the *Till Dawn* Bolan fan website. 'Marc Bolan News PT 2', accessed 2 November 2014, <http://www.tilldawn.net/News/newspt2.html>.

“empowering” representation of previously marginalised sexualities,<sup>135</sup> whereby the ‘alien’ acts as a metaphor for these identities. “Literal representations of resistance and metaphoric ‘difference’ lie at the heart of many instances of space and/or alienation appropriation”, he argues. Furthermore, alien imagery allows “room for alternate, more pluralistic definitions –the space alien as a transcendent form of Other capable of challenging simplistic binaries of male/female, black/white or rich/poor”.<sup>136</sup> As such, the alien itself is an expression of the carnivalesque, a cultural ‘social safety valve’ allowing for the imagining of *something else* – what for Bakhtin, was an expression of resistance against ‘official culture’.

The alien body in the work of both Bolan and Bowie, then, signifies not only an otherworldliness in terms of time and space - but also, a *transgressive* otherness. In the context of a still very conservative Britain, Ziggy Stardust’s gender-bending polysexualism brought homosexuality, bisexuality and cross-dressing to the fore of popular culture – at the same time, emphasising the ‘alien’, still relatively unspoken, nature of such practices in conservative society. As Jameson posits, “What, then, if the alien body were little more than a distorted expression of Utopian possibilities? If its otherness were unknowable because it signified a radical otherness latent in human history and human praxis, rather than the not-I of a physical nature?”<sup>137</sup> Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust implies exactly this, setting forth a critique of conservative sexual values.

The link between alien imagery and alternative sexualities can be seen in Bowie’s ‘John, I’m Only Dancing’ video. This clip uses framing and lighting to imbue Bowie’s presence with an off-kilter, stylised sense of alienation, as well as invoking a sense of the *film noir* femme fatale. Chiaroscuro lighting is present throughout the clip, giving Bowie a noirish feminine mystique. His eye makeup consists of a single stroke of black liquid eyeliner across the upper lid, suggesting the high glamour of

---

<sup>135</sup> Ken McLeod, “Space Oddities: Aliens, Futurism and Meaning in Popular Music”, *Popular Music* 22, no. 03 (October 2003): 338.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>137</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), 118.

a *noir* film. At the same time, and in juxtaposition with this, his bright orange hair, the paleness of his face and the bright blue of his guitar and clothing carry the shock of the 'artificial' and the 'alien'. He also bears a small, black stylised anchor 'tattoo' on his left cheekbone – this facial decoration is similar in manner to a beauty spot, again associated with *noir* and classic Hollywood. Similarly, the fur collar of his jacket evokes the glamour of a fur coat. He first appears to the left of the screen, chiaroscuro lighting illuminating half the length of his body, the rest of the screen in darkness. It appears as though he is on an empty set. As the music begins, there is a cut to an aerial shot looking down on the drummer who has begun to beat the drums, which lets us know that we are about to witness a rock performance. In the next shot, Bowie is in the foreground with the band behind him (he is still chiaroscuro-lit). He stares directly into the camera, hands on hips. His movements are somewhat restrained but still expressive. He raises his arms and points his hands towards the camera, and then in a highly deliberate pose, moves his arms around to the right of the screen. There is a cut to a sequence of two dancers. Again, the lighting is chiaroscuro, but this time it is tinted green – giving the performers an 'alien skin' effect. They appear naked, but their skin is decorated with black designs which appear like either large capillaries or reptilian scales. Heavy black eyeliner lines their eyes and eyebrows, which has the effect of being intense and dramatic. In a sequence of snake-like, sensual eroticism, their dancing involves climbing onto each other, contorting their limbs into positions such as legs over shoulders, always touching. This dance sequence is intercut with scenes of Bowie and the band, and at various stages the 'aliens' progress through moves such as the female wrapping her legs around the male's torso as he swings her around; they are also presented in silhouette as they are backlit in front of a panelled screen. The link between Bowie, aliens and eroticism is more than clear throughout these sequences.<sup>138</sup> As the 'alien' and the 'erotic' merge, we are presented with a 'sexual Other' – a sexuality that is 'strange' and unknowable. Another example of this is the LP cover image of Bowie's *Diamond Dogs*, in which Bowie is depicted as half-man, half-dog, with visible genitalia and background

---

<sup>138</sup> Additionally, avant-garde 'new dance' had begun to increase in popularity during the 1970s, and Bowie's own association with performance art is relevant here. For further reading on 1970s modern dance in Britain, see Bart Moore-Gilbert, *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994), 198-215.

fairground signage with the words, 'The World's Strangest Curiosities'. Collectively, these signs and symbols indicate the 'freak', the somehow abnormal, the hybrid, and the liminal – in effect, the strange, 'alien' body that is also linked with the sexual; or in Bakhtin's terms, with the lower bodily stratum. The 'sexual Other' depicted here is present also in Bolan's 'Jeepster', in the form of a vampiric, dangerous sexuality – which is in counterpoint to Bolan's, at that time, 'teen idol' popularity. Sexuality, in this instance, is aligned with the vampire, the monster – that is, the carnival grotesque and the lower bodily stratum. In the case of both Bolan's 'Jeepster' and Bowie's *Diamond Dogs*, the lower bodily stratum is aligned with the creature, and thus, the Other.

In conclusion, then, during the 1970s Bolan and Bowie both presented alternatives to the dominant, hegemonic ways of being. As a time of change and transformation on one level, the 1970s in Britain were still predominantly ideologically conservative, particularly in regards to gender and sexuality – this conservatism is observable in the mainstream media texts of the time, and I will elaborate on this point in the next chapter. Bolan and Bowie challenged these normative representations of gender and sexuality, representing themselves as not only androgynous and sexually ambiguous, but also by representing themselves as Other, non-normative identities - the alien, the magician, the reincarnated bard channelling words and images from another reality. These counter-hegemonic identities enacted a departure from the prevailing social and economic conditions of the contemporary moment, acting as a carnivalesque 'social safety valve' where the realities of unemployment, strikes and power cuts could be left behind, even if only for a brief period of time. Additionally, these alternative identities also challenged notions of authenticity, and the notion of identity itself – that is, Bolan and Bowie's identities were counter-hegemonic by nature of their ephemerality, their refusal to remain fixed, and their refusal to adhere to either their own claims to reality, or to reality itself. When Bowie constantly switches ideological positions and Bolan claims to have performed outlandish magical feats, then, these glam rockers' own authenticity is not merely under question, but is deliberately, counter-hegemonically refused. In the next chapter, I will further explore Bolan and Bowie's representation of gender and sexuality not only in terms of its alien,

'Other' imagery, but also in terms of the ways in which it functions as a carnivalesque, 'world upside down', counter-hegemonic challenge to conventional notions of gender and sexual identity. Following this, in chapter four, I will return to the idea of the 'Otherworldly', in regard to the ways that Bolan and Bowie's alternate identities inhabit their own Otherworldly and carnivalesque 'alternative spaces'.

## Chapter Three

### 'Alternate Sexualities': Bolan, Bowie and Gender and Sexuality

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed Bolan and Bowie's representation of 'alternate identities', and discussed the ways in which they presented these alternate identities as otherworldly personae. I also introduced the idea that these otherworldly personae represented a 'sexual Other', and in this chapter, I will further explore this idea, especially in terms of Bolan and Bowie's representation of 'alternate' gender and sexual identities. That is, I will discuss the ways that their otherworldly, alternate personae were also expressions of 'alternate' gender(s) and sexualities that were counter-hegemonic or 'alien'. Further to this, they also produced a carnivalesque enactment of gender and sexual identities that were of Bakhtin's 'world upside down' and the 'lower bodily stratum', at a time when non-conventional expressions of gender and sexuality were still relatively marginalised. In what follows, then, I will contextualise Bolan and Bowie's presentation of 'alternate genders' and 'alternate sexualities' within their contemporary moment, and within the genre of glam rock. I will then frame this in terms of the carnivalesque, before discussing Bolan and Bowie in turn.

In 1967, the Sexual Offences Act had decriminalised homosexuality in England, making homosexuality legal for people over 21 years old. British popular media at the time, however, showed that predominant attitudes were still relatively conservative – reflecting a dominant heterosexual hegemony. Gill (1995), writing on Bowie and sexuality, notes that "... queer David [Bowie] was blessed with the glow of celebrity... at a time when queer appearances in the media tended to be in the form of arrests and police statistics".<sup>139</sup> While Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell's film *Performance* (1970) featured Mick Jagger as an androgynous, bisexual rock star living a libertine lifestyle, mainstream media avoided such openly and unashamedly non-conventional representations. That is, 1970s

---

depictions of homosexuality in British popular media tended to be either comedic, heteronormative, or ignored altogether. *Are You Being Served?* (1972-1985), for example, depicted the comedically camp Mr Humphries; and *Man About the House's* (1973-1976) heterosexual male, Robin Tripp, eluded the sexually conservative landlord George Roper's refusal to allow mixed-gender tenancy by pretending to be strictly homosexual. This led to exaggerated comic situations as Robin attempted to keep up the charade. Even as late as 1979, *Minder's* Arthur Daly reminded Terry that jail time could lead to some unwanted sexual activity from the male cellmates. In the world of music, glam bands such as The Sweet dressed androgynously, but even so, their androgyny was on the 'butch', comedic end of the spectrum – making it essentially heteronormative. Even heterosexual sexuality was either depicted through bawdy humour (an extension of the vaudeville tradition), as seen in the popular *Carry On* series of films, or confined to the furtive atmosphere of the X-rated cinema,<sup>140</sup> keeping it 'off limits' from polite society. As Hunt points out, these depictions represented a 'crisis of masculinity' in 1970s Britain that operated in the popular media through "a process of disavowal and overcompensation".<sup>141</sup> In this context, Bolan and Bowie's expression of androgyny (and in Bowie's case, the depiction of homosexual acts) explicitly breaks the taboos of conservative, heteronormative values, while both addressing and complicating notions of conventional masculinity. That is, their androgynous performance is not contained by comedic laughter that either objectifies or makes the transgression 'safe for public consumption', and furthermore, it is *made public* for consumption, in the form of their music, their visual aesthetic, their promotional videos, and their live performances. It is hence more direct, 'shocking', transgressive, eroticised, and troubling to British 1970s sexual mores.

There were, however, antecedents to Bolan and Bowie's most well-known performances of gender ambiguity. Thian (2015) notes the rise of unisex clothing in the 1960s and the "ambiguous sexuality" of young men in the London mod

---

<sup>140</sup> See Hunt, *British Low Culture* for a full discussion of the representation of sex in 1970s British popular media.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

subculture;<sup>142</sup> Gregory (2002) also notes the increasing popularity of unisex clothing during the 1960s,<sup>143</sup> both of these authors linking the phenomenon with the evolution of glam's androgynous visual style. Mick Jagger, mentioned previously, had worn a white blouse/mini dress in 1969 at the Rolling Stones' concert in Hyde Park. As a teenager, Bowie himself had been a member of 'The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Long Haired Men', which aimed to raise awareness of the gender-specific verbal abuse that young men were enduring due to growing their hair long. A teenaged Bowie can be seen discussing this on the television show *Tonight* (BBC, 1964), indicating the rigid, conservative gender stereotyping of the day. 'Lola' by the Kinks (1970) was one of the first popular British songs to openly acknowledge cross-dressing and experimentation with sexuality, with its protagonist falling in love with the transgender Lola and finding that not only does he like the arrangement but that it has become his 'new normal': "Girls will be boys and boys will be girls/It's a mixed up, muddled up, shook up world, except Lola". He concludes by the end of the song that, "Well I'm not the world's most masculine man/But I know what I am and I'm a glad I'm a man/And so's Lola" – troubling conservative, conventional norms of gender and sexuality. By 1975, after Bolan and Bowie had implanted gender and sexual ambiguity even more firmly in the public imagination, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* amalgamated and further exaggerated the taboo-breaking nature of this in the character of Dr. Frank N' Furter, a "sweet transvestite, from Transsexual, Transylvania". Not only was the character of Frank N' Furter a cross-dresser who wore a corset, suspenders, feathers, high heels and heavy makeup as his daily outfit, he was also openly bisexual and promiscuous. The film, additionally, depicted him as a retro-futuristic alien who conducts science fiction experiments – a decadent, hypersexual, transsexual Dr. Frankenstein from another planet. With the lightning bolts prevalent in the latter part of the film's mise-en-scene, it is difficult not to link the film's aesthetic and overarching themes of gender, sexuality and taboo-breaking with the taboos previously broken by David Bowie, who had adopted the lightning bolt icon for the *Aladdin Sane* (1973) album cover just a few

---

<sup>142</sup> Helene Thian, 'David Bowie Is... Customizing', in *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, ed. Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 245.

<sup>143</sup> Gregory, 'Masculinity, Sexuality and the Visual Culture of Glam Rock', 35.

years earlier. Decades later, film director Todd Haynes emphasised the camp aspects of Bowie's gender and sexual ambiguity, along with Oscar Wilde's influence on Bowie, in *Velvet Goldmine* (1998); Bolan's gender ambiguity was also alluded to with the casting of Placebo's androgynous lead vocalist, Brian Molko, to perform T. Rex's '20<sup>th</sup> Century Boy' in the film. Although neither Bolan, nor Bowie, was named in *Velvet Goldmine*, it is widely accepted that Bowie's life and career was not only the inspiration, but also the model, for the film's main character Brian Slade.

### **Glam, Gender and Sexuality**

Glam rock is identifiable not only by its musical style, but also by its visual style – which was, primarily, androgynous. Hunt notes the relationship between the 1970s' aforementioned 'crisis of masculinity' and the emergence of glam rock, and suggests that glam was "... the most obvious popular articulation of [...] codes of masculinity in a limited state of flux".<sup>144</sup> Chapman (2015) argues that glam promised the transcendence of "one's immediate physical, social and even sexual environment to construct a new idealised version of the self",<sup>145</sup> and Auslander affirms that glam enabled audiences to engage with imaginary visions of alternative expressions of gender and sexuality.<sup>146</sup> While, from the hindsight of 2016, this perspective might seem obvious, it also raises the question as to *how* glam did this, by which means, and to what effect – and particularly in relation to Bolan and Bowie. Waldrep (2015) addresses these questions specifically in relation to Bowie, arguing that Bowie's 'universe' was one of a non-binary sexuality, providing an alternative to male heterosexuality<sup>147</sup> – and furthermore, that Bowie's performance of gender and sexuality acts as a Deleuzian rhizome, "a line linking different versions of gender and sexuality together to form one complex, ever changing [non-hierarchical] matrix".<sup>148</sup> In almost direct opposition

---

<sup>144</sup> Hunt, *British Low Culture*, 57.

<sup>145</sup> Ian Chapman, 'Ziggy's Urban Alienation: Assembling the Heroic Outsider', in *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, ed. Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 35.

<sup>146</sup> Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 234.

<sup>147</sup> Shelton Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia: Performing David Bowie* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 30.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

to Gregory's assertion that glam style was a form of transvestism,<sup>149</sup> Waldrep rejects the notion that Bowie could be considered in such terms – instead suggesting that his performance of gender during the glam era was, rather, of a “fluid pseudo-femininity”.<sup>150</sup> This fluidity, I would argue, is precisely what made Ziggy Stardust, and Aladdin Sane, so ambiguous and so affectingly ‘Other’ – defying simple categorisation, and by extension, troubling all conventional, hegemonic conceptions of gender identity and gender performance. It was this ‘queer’ aesthetic, or rather, the ‘queering’ of conventional norms by refusing to adhere to binary conceptions of gender and sexuality, that positioned glam era Bowie as an ambiguously gendered outsider, who also performed a non-conventional sexual identity. This was an essential element of Bowie's otherness – that is, of his self-positioning as an ‘alien’ figure. McLeod (2003) notes that “the use of alien tropes in popular music typically resists the bourgeois concept of normality”,<sup>151</sup> and that Bowie's alien persona represented his “bi-sexual alienation from the heterosexual male-dominated world of rock music”.<sup>152</sup> Furthermore, McLeod points to this alien imagery, this Otherness, as speaking to something in the psyche that fears the “non assimilable”,<sup>153</sup> while simultaneously addressing “a fundamental fascination with the unknown”.<sup>154</sup> In conservative British society, then, during a time when homosexuality, and often sex itself, was kept *‘just out of sight’*, Bowie and Bolan represented a challenge to these heterosexual, sexually conservative norms – bringing sexuality, and non-binary (and that time, therefore ‘alien’ and ‘unknown’) expressions of gender and sexuality, into ‘public view’.

In relation to my discussion of Bolan and Bowie's otherworldly personae, it is pertinent that McLeod's exploration of ‘alien’, non-binary conceptions of class, race, gender and sexuality extends beyond the literal ‘space alien’. He argues that “throughout history, various gods, goddesses, demons, angels, fairies, vampires, monsters and a host of other chimera have hard-wired the ‘alien’ into the collective

---

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>151</sup> McLeod, ‘Space Oddities’, 339.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 337.

Western consciousness”, all of them feeding into ‘alien anxiety’.<sup>155</sup> While Bolan’s otherworldly personae, as I have previously noted, was not a literal space alien, it *was* otherworldly in the sense that he positioned himself as an elf, a magician, a warlock, and one who possessed supernatural abilities – and in this sense, he positioned himself as ‘alien’ to the everyday, and he combined this otherworldliness with a gender performance that transcended binaries in perhaps a less obvious, yet possibly more confounding way than Bowie. That is, while Bolan’s expression of gender and sexuality was considerably less theatrical and sartorially flamboyant than Bowie’s, his persona as the ‘bopping elf’ with supernatural, otherworldly connections, was feminised, fey, and ‘non-threatening’, yet at other times aggressively sexual (and heterosexual) – and all the while, he dressed himself in ‘feminine’ pink satin and feather boas. I will examine this in detail later in this chapter, but at this early juncture, it is essential to emphasise that what Bolan and Bowie shared was that they both troubled conventional notions of masculinity and heterosexuality, and they did so by way of their Otherworldliness. That is, the otherworldly figure, be that alien or elf, represents in McLeod’s words, the “marginalised identity”.<sup>156</sup> In other words, their otherworldliness acted simultaneously as a vehicle, a parallel, and a metaphor for their Otherness in terms of gender and sexuality. With this context in mind, I will now turn to the carnivalesque as my theoretical framework for understanding Bolan and Bowie’s representation of these counter-hegemonic, ‘alternate’ gender and sexual identities.

### **The ‘World Upside Down’ and the Lower Bodily Stratum**

In representing themselves as decidedly ‘Other’ in terms of identity, gender and sexuality, Bolan and Bowie embody Bakhtin’s oppositional ‘world upside down’, and the ambivalence of the carnivalesque ‘lower bodily stratum’. Within carnival, hierarchies were reversed, including traditional notions of gender, and the hierarchy of the body. Carnival itself, as I have previously mentioned, was most potent at times of crisis and change, and Bakhtin argues that this “radical breaking up of the world’s hierarchical picture and the building of a new concept” led to a

---

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 338.

revision of the old ideas, bringing a “momentary liberation” from all previous logic.<sup>157</sup> This, for Bakhtin, is embodied in the ‘world upside down’, where there we see “turnabout, [...] opposite faces and intentionally upset proportions”.<sup>158</sup> Most pertinently for my exploration of Bolan and Bowie in relation to gender, Bakhtin notes that “we see this first of all in the participants’ apparel. Men are transvested as women and vice versa, costumes are turned inside out, and outer garments replace underwear”.<sup>159</sup> In doing so, the old ways are destroyed and the ‘new world’ is celebrated. That is, the world upside down element of the carnivalesque “offers a description of the world’s metamorphosis, its remodelling, its transfer from the old to the new, from the past to the future. It is the world passing through the phase of death on the way to birth”<sup>160</sup> – a utopian, future-oriented critique of present-day hegemonic power relations, and in terms of my own argument, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality.

Although Bakhtin was writing decades before Butler published the seminal *Gender Trouble* (2002), we can link his ideas on the subject with Butler’s notion of the “implicit gender hierarchy”<sup>161</sup> enacted within what she terms the “hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality;”<sup>162</sup> within this discourse, gender is socially constructed and expressed through the “stylised repetition of [gender-specific] acts”.<sup>163</sup> In Bakhtin’s carnival, and more specifically in Bowie and Bolan’s representation of gender and sexuality, we see the counter-hegemonic, counter-privileging of what Butler calls a “nonhierarchical configuration of shifting and overlapping [gender] identifications”,<sup>164</sup> in which gender becomes “a free-floating artifice”.<sup>165</sup> This is pertinent to my discussion of Bolan, Bowie and the carnivalesque, as the gender performance that they enact is in fact an aspect of their *performance personae* – the

---

<sup>157</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 246.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 411.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>161</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition* (New York; London: Routledge, 2002), 17.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>164</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 84.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

carnival mask. In other words, their gender performance may not necessarily be their own personal gender identification, but an aspect of the performance itself. In any case, we can be sure that what they do present us with is a subversive expression of gender and sexuality that opposes the 'official' culture.

In relation to this, it is Bolan and Bowie's adoption of conventionally 'feminine' clothing, and 'feminine' gesture and affectation, that celebrates the breaking down of conventional norms. Returning again to Butler, whose theory here amplifies that of Bakhtin, it is important to note that Bolan and Bowie's performance of gender is "a corporeal style, an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning",<sup>166</sup> through "stylisation of the body [...] bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds"<sup>167</sup> in which gender configurations are enacted "outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality".<sup>168</sup> That is, in Bakhtin's terms, it is a site where the 'old' ways must make way for new conceptions of gender and/or sexual identity. There is a carnivalesque negation at work in Bolan and Bowie's gender performance, whereby both artists visibly possess the physical markers of masculinity – and yet they position themselves as *not*-'masculine'. Furthermore, though they adopt feminised clothing and gestures, they also position themselves as *not*-'women'; their performance of gender and sexuality, then, enacts a liminality that negates hegemonic understanding of such matters. This negation, Bakhtin states, does not represent a "nothingness", but rather, "the 'other side' of that which is denied"<sup>169</sup> – this 'other side' being the 'alien', 'Otherworldly', and unknowable that I mentioned earlier. Furthermore, this negation, this 'alien-ising', actively reconstructs the very idea of gender and sexuality, refusing the binary classifications of male/female, and straight/gay. Sedgwick's (1990) argument against the heterosexual/homosexual binary opposition is relevant here, amplifying Bakhtin's notion of the 'world upside down' and the breaking down of established norms and hierarchies. That is, Sedgwick notes that sexual orientation presents us with great potential for "rearrangement,

---

<sup>166</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition*, 177.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>169</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 410.

ambiguity, and representational doubleness”.<sup>170</sup> This rearrangement, ambiguity and doubleness, then, if we consider it through a Bakhtinian lens, means that “the object that has been destroyed remains in the world but in a new form of being in time and space; it becomes the ‘other side’ of the new object that has taken its place”.<sup>171</sup> The act of negation is a rearrangement, an act of counter-hegemonic, utopian opposition to the “official world and all its prohibitions and limitations”<sup>172</sup> – presenting us with gender and sexual ambiguities that act as counter-representations to the essentially conservative, hegemonic images of gender and sexuality that audiences were most often seeing in the 1970s British media.

Moreover, Bakhtin’s conception of the ‘lower bodily stratum’ is relevant to our discussion of Bolan and Bowie’s representation of sexuality itself. The genital organs, in Bakhtin’s theory, are a carnival element that is counter-hegemonic – with sexuality itself, including the sexual act, representing renewal and regeneration.<sup>173</sup> The lower bodily stratum is unable to express itself in official culture, and possesses the ambivalent logic of the carnivalesque ‘world upside down’. As I previously mentioned, sex was subject to much censoring in the 1970s British media, either being hinted at through innuendo (as seen in *Are You Being Served?*), constructed from the position of a heteronormative male gaze (as seen in the *Carry On* series of films), or relegated to the X-rated cinema. Bowie in particular put sex, and the lower bodily stratum, ‘front and centre’, breaking mainstream taboos in relation to the depiction of sexuality. Both artists, furthermore, presented their gender and sexual identities in a manner which for Bakhtin, represents carnival ‘ambivalence’. That is, carnival is contradictory, troubling conventional definitions and hegemonic expectations; and in the case of Bolan and Bowie, this is expressed in their representation of the liminality and ephemerality of gender and sexuality. In the performance of these two artists, we witness a fluid and ambiguous, rather than binary, expression of such matters –

---

<sup>170</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Introduction: Axiomatic’, in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 34.

<sup>171</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 410.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 412.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

defying and confounding conservative binary, hegemonic definitions of gender and sexuality.

### **Bolan's Gender Ambiguity and Heterosexual 'Performance'**

Bolan's androgyny, or more correctly his gender ambiguity, is closely bound with his otherworldly, elfin persona, which was at odds with his often masculinised expressions of sexuality. From Bolan's early days in Tyrannosaurus Rex, he was associated with the 'feminine' domain of acoustic folk music. That is, the acoustic guitar, writes Auslander, had become "feminised" in the 1960s, taken up by performers such as Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell;<sup>174</sup> Bolan's perhaps most famous performance posture, sitting cross-legged on the stage playing acoustic guitar, is described by Auslander as passive and 'feminised', and his electric guitar performances as active yet "effeminate", switching between gender identifications, as he at times becomes more aggressively sexual during those very performances.<sup>175</sup> I will discuss Bolan's guitar performance later in this section, but for now I will focus on the aspects of his persona and performance that destabilise, or 'turn upside down', in the carnivalesque sense, conventional gender representation.

In 'Rip Off' (1971), Bolan sings "I'm the king of the highway, I'm the queen of the hop", making explicit within the song his persona as simultaneously masculinised *and* feminised. From the early days of Tyrannosaurus Rex, Bolan's performance emphasised a gentle demeanour – that of the fey, elfin, romantic "magic prince", as he was referred to by television presenter Steve Merike in 1973. His long, neo-Romantic corkscrew hair remained his key physical signifier throughout his career. His 'non-masculine' styling was the subject of Bowie's 'Lady Stardust' (1972), thereby cementing his feminised public persona: "People stared at the makeup on his face/Laughed at his long black hair, his animal grace" – makeup, long hair, and 'animal grace' being signifiers of femininity; not only that, they were signifiers that, in the narrative of the song, drew attention for their non-conformity. Referring to Bolan as '*Lady Stardust*' further emphasised his non-

---

<sup>174</sup> Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 102.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

conventional, 'world upside down' gender performance. In 1971 when Bolan launched the 'glam' aesthetic on *Top of the Pops*, he did so in a silver satin sailor's outfit, with glitter applied to his cheekbones. The soft, metallic-coloured fabric and the silver 'fairy dust' on his cheeks – a 'magical' version of women's blusher – presented audiences with an ambiguously-gendered, 'non-masculine' young man singing about giving 'Hot Love' to a young woman. From the glam, T. Rex years, onward, Bolan began to wear women's 'Mary Jane'-style heeled shoes with his satin outfits; notably, the video for 'Get It On' (1971) employs close-ups on these feminine shoes as Bolan stamps his feet in time to the music, and paired with his pink satin suit, there is no doubt that we are watching a performer who is intent on projecting a feminised form of masculinity, while singing from the perspective of the active, male heterosexual gaze about 'getting it on'. Bolan also, throughout the glam years, began to wear eyeshadow, blusher, and feather boas – all of which are, conventionally, feminine choices of adornment, with connotations of glamour (which is again, associated with femininity), and as such, Bolan's self-representation as an ambiguously-gendered heterosexual man is also an expression of 'camp'. Sontag (1966) notes that the androgyne, the feminine man, conveys a beauty that is achieved by "going against the grain of one's sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine".<sup>176</sup> Bolan's camp performance can be seen in his clothing, and his gestures, and as we will see later in this section, even within the set of his television performances. Performing 'Metal Guru' on *Top of the Pops* in 1972, he wears flared dungarees made completely of metallic turquoise sequined fabric, with coral eyeshadow and black eyeliner on the rims of his eyes; on the video for '20<sup>th</sup> Century Boy', the same eye makeup augments the black feather boa slung around his neck. The feather boa and makeup are also worn by Bolan without irony – they are simply his chosen adornment, as opposed to a parodic appropriation of the conventionally feminine. Appearing on Cilla Black's television show *Cilla* in 1973, Bolan wears a hot pink boa with a form-fitting, shiny black top, and black eyeliner on the rims of his eyes, to perform 'Life's A Gas' as a duet with Black. As Auslander notes, this television performance casts Bolan in the

---

<sup>176</sup> Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp"', in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), 279.

role of the active, romantic male, with Black as the object of his attention; Auslander also posits that when Bolan hands the boa to her, this represents another moment of his malleability in relation to gender<sup>177</sup> – that is, by doing so, he masculinises himself by romantically surrendering the feminising signifier to its ‘conventional owner’, the woman in the song (who is at that moment, being ‘performed’ by Black).

Beyond the clothing, however, Bolan’s carnivalesque gender performance was primarily about gesture. Most of his performances in the glam era included a toss of the hair and a coy smile. His increasingly theatrical performance style from 1973 onwards took Bolan’s ambiguity into the realm of the self-consciously camp. Hosting his own television show, *Marc*, in 1977, his costumes, physical mannerisms, and manner of enunciation were even more effeminate – and the studio set of *Marc* reflected this, often being ‘feminine’ in its styling. As Sontag notes, “clothes, furniture, all the elements of visual décor [...] make up a large part of Camp”,<sup>178</sup> and furthermore, that “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration”<sup>179</sup> – and this was perhaps never more evident throughout Bolan’s career as it was as on the set of *Marc*. The animated opening titles, with the theme song ‘Sing Me A Song’, culminate in the title, ‘Marc’, glittering with stars before flashing on and off, and back on again. In episode 1, the opening titles give way to Bolan performing the theme song on a studio stage. Wearing a body-hugging leopard-print shirt and trousers, with the shirt unbuttoned in such a way as to approximate the feminised revealing of ‘cleavage’, he tosses his hair, softly tilts his neck backward while bending his knees slightly, minimising his stature – a leopard-print, ‘male-bodied’ amalgam of Greta Garbo and Marilyn Monroe. He wears heavier foundation here than he did in the early 1970s (although it might be fair to assume that this is also due to him being filmed for a television show), and eyeshadow and eyeliner. He gently yet theatrically pushes aside the long hair that has flopped into his eyes, and runs his hands over his chest as though emphasising the ‘cleavage’ area. The gesture here signifies the feminine

---

<sup>177</sup> Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 103.

<sup>178</sup> Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, 278.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

body, yet the physical body we see in front of us is without female breasts. At the theme song's conclusion, Bolan seats himself amidst a pastel pink set, decorated with a vase of pink flowers, to introduce his first guest – The Jam. The pink set and the flowers effectively feminise Bolan's surroundings, which he inhabits without irony. After other guest appearances and further musical performances from Bolan, he 'wraps up' the show standing on the stage, hands effeminately placed on his hips; he flips the hair from his eyes, and in a gentle voice, tells us to "Keep a little Marc in your heart" and to come back again next week, at the "same Marc time, [on the] same Marc channel" – a dulcet-toned, almost seductive invitation to continue to join him in his ambiguous gender performance. This formula repeated in each episode of the series. Episode 6, the final in the series, is notable not only for David Bowie's guest appearance, but also for Bolan's introduction of Billy Idol on his television debut. Dyer (2002) argues that camp "is a way of being human, witty and vital, without conforming to the drabness and rigidity of the hetero male role",<sup>180</sup> and this is what we see here. Standing within the pastel pink studio set, Bolan wears a hot pink satin shirt with the letters 'M-A-R-C' spelled out in bright yellow cursive lettering; the shirt is tied above the waist, so as to reveal Bolan's torso above his tight grey jeans. Again, clothing here is feminised in such a way that it reveals an area of the body – the waist – that is conventionally considered 'feminine'. He stands with a loose posture, slightly side-on to the camera, letting his wrist fall softly forward as he holds a pink carnation plucked from the vase. In introducing Idol's band, Generation X, he sniffs the carnation and states that "the lead singer's supposed to be as pretty as me" – at once feminising himself *and* Idol. Further, he adds, "We'll see about that", and tosses the carnation over his shoulder while tossing his head back and theatrically stretching his body to reveal his belly button to the camera. It is worth remembering here that in years past, the female belly button was considered so taboo in television that Barbara Eden's character in *I Dream of Jeannie* did not reveal hers, even in a genie outfit; however, the 1970s in British television had allowed very skimpily-clad female performances, such as those of Pan's People, the dancers on *Top of the Pops*, or Bolan's own dancers on *Marc*. In revealing his belly button to the camera, Bolan in effect presents us with another sexualised, feminised area of the body, but performed in a 'male sexed'

---

<sup>180</sup> Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002), 49.

body. Furthermore, he performs the negatively-connoted expression of 'female jealousy' – in particular, in regards to competition over 'who is the prettiest'. The 'feminine' here is wholly focused on aesthetics and physical appearance as the locus of achievement – and as problematic as this is from a feminist standpoint, in the culture of the 1970s where radical feminism had not long begun its journey, Bolan's appropriation of this 'effeminate' stance still represented a gender-troubling challenge to conventional norms of gender performance.

While Bolan's ambiguity lay in his gender performance, the lyrical content of his songs, however, was unabashedly heterosexual – ranging from romantic ballads addressed to 'mystic ladies' and potential priestesses, to sexualised appraisals of the female body. For example, 'She Was Born to Be My Unicorn' (1969) is a fantasy-themed ballad of conventionally heterosexual romantic love, while 'Get It On' (1971) casts its heterosexual male gaze over the female body, even if it does express its sexualised appraisal in car-themed metaphors: "You're built like a car, you got a hub cap, diamond star halo/You're dirty sweet and you're my girl". It was this lyrical heterosexuality that, ironically, further reinforced Bolan's ambiguity as, in effect, it disconnected his gender performance from his performance of sexual orientation. If audiences at any time asked 'Is Marc Bolan gay?', then they were not to find any evidence of this within his songs – and they would be further confounded and confused at the times when he performed a masculinised, active (as opposed to passive) sexuality on stage. These performances, while being conventionally masculine, also enacted a carnivalesque expression of Bakhtin's 'lower bodily stratum' – that is, the genital area. Confounding things even further, Bolan was also in the liminal space of being not only a rock star with a countercultural past, but also a teen pop idol – as evidenced by the T. Rex phenomenon. Bolan featured regularly in teen magazine *Jackie* alongside teen idols such as David Cassidy and Donny Osmond, and it was his gender ambiguity that was part of his teen appeal – representing a non-threatening sexuality that was at odds with his sexualised stage performances.

In terms of the lower bodily stratum, Bolan began writing lyrics that referred to the genital area and to sexual acts as early as 1968. In 'Juniper Suction' (1968), for

example, the song's protagonist appears to be a penis – or at least, the character's penis is a metaphor for the character himself: he hides “with my head in the tent of the bed/And my body is sucked through your eyes/Then I quiver and shiver and start to deliver the goods/Then I vanish in size”. ‘One Inch Rock’ (1970) is the tale of a giant woman putting the tiny protagonist into a tin can; one line in the song has been interpreted as being about the anxieties around either erectile dysfunction or having a small penis, or perhaps even the *vagina dentata*: “I got the horrors ‘cause I’m one inch tall”. On stage, Bolan’s guitar solo performances were not only phallic, but masturbatory, as can be seen in the concert sections of the film *Born to Boogie* (1972). As Auslander notes, “Enacting the well-worn analogy between rock music and sexual arousal, Bolan opened his mouth and sighed at climactic moments during the solo”,<sup>181</sup> and more specifically:

He strutted back centre stage with one tambourine, crouched down facing the audience with the neck of his guitar jutting up from his crotch [...] and began rubbing the tambourine against the strings on the body of the guitar. He slid the tambourine up and down the neck and strings, rising to more of a standing position. When he reached ‘climax’, he flung the tambourine up the neck of the guitar into the audience.<sup>182</sup>

The album cover of *Tanx* (1973) was similarly themed, with Bolan wearing a feather boa and straddling a small tank – the tank gun jutting out from between his legs. In ‘Hot Love’ (1971), he alternates between sentiments that are heterosexually romantic, and heterosexually raunchy; “I don’t mean to be bold, but may I hold your hand?”, early in the song, is ‘replaced’ later with a pronouncement of his sexual abilities - “I’m her two-penny prince and I give her hot love, uh-huh”. ‘Raw Ramp’ (1971) is even more explicit in its male gaze upon the female body: “Baby, I love your chest, ooh/Lady, I’m crazy ‘bout your breasts”. And yet, along with the ‘monstrous sexuality’ I discussed in the previous chapter, Bolan still presented the increasingly camp gender performance that was evident in the *Marc* show. Having delineated Bolan’s representation of gender and sexuality, then, I

---

<sup>181</sup> Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 95.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

will now turn to the ways in which Bowie took up and extended upon the gender and sexual ambiguity that Bolan so successfully brought to a mass audience.

### **Bowie's Gender and Sexual Ambiguity**

It is ironic that while Bolan's performance had reached new levels of camp on *Marc*, Bowie's costuming for his guest appearance consisted of a plain blue, dressed-down, 'masculine' buttoned shirt and jeans. However, throughout Bowie's glam years, he took gender ambiguity and its 'alien-ness' to levels that extended beyond Bolan's. Waldrep (2015) notes that Bowie's ambiguity is due to the fact that despite his feminised styling and performance, he does not perform *as a woman*, but as a feminised man.<sup>183</sup> As is the case with Bolan, Waldrep argues that "Bowie called into question the limits of our definitions of gender and sexuality, creating not transvestism or camp, but the defamiliarisation of the body",<sup>184</sup> with the fluidity of his performance of gender and sexuality in the Ziggy Stardust persona being a utopian "nostalgia for the future".<sup>185</sup> In Bakhtinian terms, this represents the breaking down of the old to reveal the new, through negation and the world 'upside down' that I discussed earlier.

Bowie's counter-hegemonic gender performance began much earlier than his Ziggy phase. The album cover of *The Man Who Sold the World* (1970) features a long-haired Bowie, wearing a long dress and high boots, reclining on a settee. The *Hunky Dory* (1971) album cover depicts Bowie in a Garbo-esque pose, and the song 'Oh! You Pretty Things' from that album addresses the young generation in ambiguously gendered terms. That is, the entire group is not addressed as either male or female, but only as 'pretty things' – both the implied male and female addressees are 'pretty', and in this sense, all are feminised. Post-Ziggy, 'Rebel Rebel' (1973) was explicit in its lyrical representation of gender ambiguity and its ability to perturb the more conservative generation: "Got your mother in a whirl/She's not sure if you're a boy or a girl". It turns out that we, as the listener, are also not sure: the character wears a dress and is referred to in the song as a

---

<sup>183</sup> This was the case, at least, in Bowie's glam years. The video for 'Boys Keep Swinging' (1979) features Bowie in various 'full drag' costumes.

<sup>184</sup> Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia*, 18.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30.

“hot tramp”, and conventionally this type of description is coded feminine – but at no point within the song does Bowie state whether the character *is* a boy or a girl. It is typically Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust persona, however, that is most widely acknowledged for its challenge to conventional notions of gender. Chapman (2015) notes the impact of Bowie’s seminal 1972 performance of ‘Starman’ on *Top of the Pops*: “[Nobody] went on TV looking like that in 1972... *nobody*. Bowie wore a tight-fitting gold, red and blue jumpsuit that accentuated his skinny, androgynous frame, and his hair was red and rooster-styled, teased up and spiky on top and long and feathered at the back and sides;”<sup>186</sup> in the days and weeks following the broadcast, glitter, makeup and red ‘Bowie’ haircuts became increasingly popular among the young generation,<sup>187</sup> as the ‘Starman’s androgynous style paved the way for new, gender-bending fashion statements.

Waldrep argues that during the Ziggy Stardust era, Bowie’s “Oriental” stage costumes – which were designed for him by Japanese designer Kansai Yamamoto – allowed him to represent androgyny as a “hyperstylisation that draws on transgressive fantasies of bi- or unisexed beings”.<sup>188</sup> He also notes that the costumes revealed areas of skin “usually associated with the male gaze of a woman’s body”, describing the “frisson” of those erotically divided sections of the clothing.<sup>189</sup> Bowie’s “gay erotics”, he notes, are drawn from his ability to show us “how the body in its clothes codes gender and encodes sexuality”.<sup>190</sup> This is equally applicable to Bolan’s gender performance, particularly on the *Marc* show – and it particularly pertinent in regard to the 1973 Ziggy Stardust tour, which was released on film as *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1973).

The concert opens with ‘Hang On to Yourself’, but it is Bowie’s performance of the following song, ‘Ziggy Stardust’, that exemplifies his counter-hegemonic gender performance. On a darkened stage, Bowie’s full-length coat is removed with a flourish by two ‘hidden’ wardrobe assistants at the periphery of his spotlight, to

---

<sup>186</sup> Ian Chapman, *Experiencing David Bowie: A Listener’s Companion* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 2.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>188</sup> Waldrep, *Future Nostalgia*, 111.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

reveal his next outfit: a white silk kimono mini-dress accessorised with over-the-knee white satin boots with ribbon tied around the top. Like a Hollywood starlet making an entrance onstage, he throws his arms in the air, raises his head regally and stands with his legs apart. The bell sleeves of the kimono hang like decorative drapery, producing a striking, symmetrical image. It seems that Bowie here is fully aware of the 'composition' of his pose. He lowers his arms, turns his face deliberately to the left, and then approaches the microphone to sing 'Ziggy Stardust' – the change of outfit and highly composed, 'framed' regal stance emphasising the sense of 'making an entrance'. This is, in a sense, the entrance of the performed character 'Ziggy Stardust'. From this point, Bowie's stage costuming, mannerisms and overall persona become particularly feminised and eroticised. During Ziggy's eponymous song, Bowie emphasises his bare legs by standing one foot up on the ramp at the edge of the stage, and leaning forward. At once, this is a gesture of inclusivity (leaning toward the audience and pointing outwards as he sings) and an eroticised pose, bearing some resemblance to a burlesque or strip-tease dancer. He then stands with his legs apart, rocking his hips from side to side, before turning his back to the audience to slowly walk away, revealing the back of his thighs before coyly looking back over his shoulder to deliver the line "Oh yeah". The entire sequence of gestures is a feminised, sexualised 'tease'. To deliver the final line of the song ("Now Ziggy played guitar"), he once again assumes his introductory pose – once again regal – arms raised in the air, kimono sleeves billowing. Additionally, the grainy, low-angled shots from behind Bowie during 'Watch That Man' evoke a sense of 'peeping tom' voyeurism as the viewer effectively 'looks up' at the back of his bare thighs, slinky 'miniskirt' barely covering his buttocks. The hemline of Bowie's kimono is in fact much shorter than a woman would wear in public even in the age of the 'permissive society'; it is thus an exaggeration of women's 'sexually liberated' fashion trends, leaving very little to the imagination. Additionally, one of Bowie's more prominent gestures throughout the performance, and the entire concert, is that of standing with his legs apart, hips gently swaying, which is at once commanding (or conventionally 'masculine') and coy (conventionally 'feminine'), blurring his stance into a male-bodied performance of ambiguous gender.

Bowie's costume for 'Changes' is a form-fitting, glittery striped jumpsuit embellished with large, structured decorative shoulder pads that almost emulate the 'wings' that might be seen on a spaceship. Accessorised with platform boots and one circular earring pinned to his earlobe, this outfit is that of an ambiguous alien space traveller (as opposed to the bisexual alien 'tease' of the previous outfit). 'The Width of a Circle' sees Bowie wearing a form-fitting blouse-style leotard with a feminine wide collar-line and one diamond chandelier-style earring. This costume is softly 'feminine' and glamorous, yet the feminine 'blouse' is subverted, as a bodysuit that reveals the length of Bowie's legs. The subversion of 'everyday' feminine styles, and Bowie's ambiguity or androgyny, unlike Bolan's, is also enmeshed with his performance of an ambiguous *sexual* identity. In 'Moonage Daydream' (1972), Bowie sings that "alien love will spark the future". The sexually ambiguous Ziggy Stardust, then, brings a carnivalesque renewal and sweeping away of the 'old' and the officially sanctioned – and he does this through a counter-hegemonic, metaphorically 'alien' sexuality. 'Lady Stardust', also from the *Ziggy Stardust* album and which I previously mentioned in relation to Bolan's gender ambiguity, also presents us with the possibility that Bowie had written this as a 'love song' to Bolan: "I smiled sadly for a love I could not obey". Perhaps he could not 'obey' this 'love' due to Bolan's apparent heterosexuality; the two were never explicitly linked in a romantic or erotic sense, and Bolan's most public relationships were with his wife June Child, and later partner Gloria Jones. Waldrep (2004) notes that, as I have already mentioned in the previous chapter, during the 1970s Bowie professed several different orientations: homosexual, bisexual, and heterosexual. Bowie himself has stated that he was never ambiguous about his sexuality – but that the character of Ziggy Stardust was certainly sexually ambiguous;<sup>191</sup> however despite this, Waldrep states that Bowie was "one of the most influential forces in the shaping of queer iconography within popular culture",<sup>192</sup> noting that from 1972, Bowie made visible the erotic energy contained within rock music, that until then, had not been directly depicted as homosexual.<sup>193</sup> This, again, places Bowie – and Ziggy Stardust – in the carnivalesque realm of

---

<sup>191</sup> Waldrep, *The Aesthetics of Self-Invention*, 107.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 107–108.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

making visible what was not seen within 'official culture', with the lower bodily stratum as a force for renewal and change.

Hinted at in 'Rebel Rebel' (1973) with the lines "You like me and I like it all", and in the narrative of 'John, I'm Only Dancing' (1972) Bowie lyrically presented us with a sexually ambiguous persona. In the latter, the song's protagonist insists to his lover, John, that he is "only dancing" with this other man; although he admits that "he turns me on", he is still only *dancing* and not, presumably, being physically unfaithful. Though on film, Mick Jagger's character in the movie *Performance* was androgynous, bisexual, and living a libertine lifestyle, it was Bowie's relatively mild 1972 performance of 'Starman' on *Top of the Pops* that set in motion what would become the onstage sexualised, homoerotic relationship between himself and guitarist Mick Ronson. On *Top of the Pops*, the androgynous Bowie puts his arm around guitarist Mick Ronson – a gesture which, for some, was ambiguous in terms of whether it was a moment of homosocial camaraderie, or whether it meant something 'more'. For others, it meant for sure that Bowie was gay. Novelist Rupert Smith, for example, remembered the hug as "simultaneously blokey but also a bit gay. It may not sound like much now, but in 1972 it was a revolution".<sup>194</sup> And so, when on tour as Ziggy Stardust, Bowie routinely simulated fellatio on Ronson's guitar as part of the onstage performance, this move from the homosocial to the open depiction of a sexual act was especially shocking and counter-hegemonic. The moment of onstage 'fellatio' is well documented and often talked about – but beyond this, Bowie goes even further and onstage with Ronson, simulates actual penetrative sex. In what follows, I will discuss this key moment of the *Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1973) concert film.

The performance of 'Time' on the Ziggy Stardust tour is representative of a moment of cultural transition, breaking taboos around the depiction of an eroticised homosexual body, and, even more so, the depiction of homosexual acts – acts which by law, were only to happen 'in private'. Throughout the film, there are striking moments of the blurring of conventional distinctions of gender and

---

<sup>194</sup> Sara Boboltz, 'The 1972 David Bowie Performance That Jumpstarted The 21st Century', *Huffington Post*, 11 January 2016, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/david-bowie-top-of-the-pops\\_us\\_5693ff52e4b0cad15e65ac86](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/david-bowie-top-of-the-pops_us_5693ff52e4b0cad15e65ac86).

sexuality, through Bowie's costuming and mannerisms - which are not just feminised, but more importantly, eroticised. During the show, Bowie takes the role of a lounge singer, channeling Marlene Dietrich, to perform 'Time'. Emotively, he brings one hand to the feather boa, and then suggestively glides his hand downwards, half-kneeling as he sings the line "falls wanking to the floor" - as he does so, undercutting the glamour of the boa and his feminised gestures with the use of blunt colloquialism. The effect of this is both eroticised and, within a social context of still relatively conservative sexual mores, an expression of subversive sexuality. Bowie in the role of Ziggy, who is in turn now in the role of female nightclub singer, approximates the masturbatory actions of a *male*, putting up for public display a confoundingly ambiguous, transsexual act of sexual bodily function. The lower bodily stratum, and its potential for physical emissions, has taken centre stage. Furthermore, adding to the complexity of this ambiguity, Bowie has taken Dietrich's gender reversal and turned it back on itself.<sup>195</sup> In doing so, he thus makes reference to his own sexual ambiguity within the moment of sexual ambiguity itself. In the climax to the song, the lower bodily stratum is further emphasised. As Mick Ronson launches into the song's guitar solo, he pounces at Bowie, who lands on his front, outstretched on the stage. Ronson mounts him from behind, pinning him down with his legs as he continues with the guitar solo - which in this performance, stands in for the penetrative act. Auslander (2006) has made mention of whether this sequence depicts consensual sex or a rape.<sup>196</sup> I posit that, given Bowie's facial expressions and catlike physical gestures, that this sequence alludes to a sexual act between animals - especially given Bowie's feline manner of walking around the stage just previous to this display. Whether this is to be construed as a depiction of consensual or non-consensual domination, is open to question; either way, the dynamics here are both ambiguous and potentially troubling. Furthermore, the sexual act, the moment of copulation, stands here as the ultimate display of the (homosexual) lower bodily stratum in action - making public the simulation of an 'act' that, by law, was only permitted behind closed doors. The closing of the concert, after Bowie's exit from the stage, is soundtracked by Edward Elgar's 'Pomp and Circumstance', which gives a sense of theatrical high

---

<sup>195</sup> For this observation, I am indebted to my friend and fellow Bowie fan, Matthew Scott.

<sup>196</sup> See Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 144.

culture and occasion, and a sense of irony. This classical composition is also widely known as the musical accompaniment to 'Land of Hope and Glory', a traditional song extolling British patriotism. It is also traditionally the final song of the Last Night of the Proms. It evokes connotations of patriotism, high culture, and occasion – but given the dire social and economic circumstances of England at the time, this particular use of the song takes on an ironic sense of impotence. Although its performance in the show is instrumental, the song's lyrics "God who made thee mighty/make thee mightier yet", speak of a traditional and 'strong' England that by now had long gone. And along with it, so too were disappearing its traditional distinctions, and now depictions, of gender and sexuality – with David Bowie at the forefront.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have discussed the ways in which Bolan and Bowie's otherworldly personae were simultaneously a parallel, a metaphor and a vehicle for their 'alternate', carnivalesque representations of gender and sexuality. In turning the world 'upside down' and destabilising conventional binary notions of gender and sexual identity, they presented audiences with an ambiguity that did away with the 'old' forms to make way for the new. As an aspect of their performance personae which were already counter-hegemonic in terms of their employment of the carnival mask, troubling conventional notions of identity itself, it was these ambiguous performances of gender and sexuality that further consolidated Bolan and Bowie's personae as 'alien Others'. In the next chapter, then, I will discuss the fantasy and science fiction Otherworlds that these 'alternate personae' inhabited – and the ways that these Otherworlds represented an escape from the everyday life of 1970s Britain.

## Chapter Four

### 'Alternate Realities': Bolan and Bowie's Carnavalesque Otherworlds

In chapters two and three, I discussed Bolan and Bowie's otherworldly personae, and in this chapter I will discuss the Otherworlds that these otherworldly personae inhabit – Bowie's near-future science fiction dystopia, which we will take as a critical comment on the contemporaneous moment, and Bolan's mystic sci fi utopia, both presenting, in their unique and idiosyncratic ways, a carnivalesque escape from the everyday life of 1970s Britain. As we will see, Bolan and Bowie's alternate, Otherworldly personae did not exist in a narrative vacuum, or as simply brightly-dressed, quirky personalities that were counterpoints to contemporary everyday fashion or conceptions of authenticity – and they were, furthermore, not simply counterpoints to conservative, conventional representations of gender and sexuality. They were, rather, personae that existed in (often, but not always) fully developed narrative Otherworlds that Jameson might describe as ones that demonstrate the “chemical deficiencies of our own present”, offering an “imaginary compensation” for these aforementioned deficiencies<sup>197</sup> – in other words, Bakhtin's ‘second life’ of the people. This ‘second life’, then, presents an ‘alternate reality’ that is, in Bakhtin's words, “hostile to all that was immortalised and completed”, representing a “liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order”.<sup>198</sup> What was not possible in everyday life was possible in the second life of carnival, with “no distance between those who came in contact with each other and [liberation] from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times”.<sup>199</sup> Bolan and Bowie's narrative spaces – their ‘alternate realities’ – are, then, the liberatory carnival spaces in which their alternate identities, and their alternate sexualities, are privileged and played out, while also being critical spaces where the present-day is critiqued. These narrative spaces also depart from ordinary life, and therefore from the socio-cultural conditions of the day – which, as I have

---

<sup>197</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 59.

<sup>198</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

already detailed, were increasingly demoralising, with life in 1970s Britain being characterised by rising unemployment, economic difficulty, industrial action, and IRA bombings. In other words, Bolan and Bowie's otherworlds were carnivalesque spaces that worked to "de-reify the socio-cultural world, to overcome the alienation fostered by contemporary society and to encourage a renewed awareness of [...] 'the dregs of an everyday gross reality'".<sup>200</sup> Further to this, Bolan and Bowie's alternative, carnivalesque, realities are also liminal spaces, occupying and yet *not* occupying the present day of 1970s Britain. That is, they are spaces that existed as part of the media landscape of the 1970s, and yet they engage with the present-day realities by presenting an *alternative* to those realities, whether that alternative is Bowie's dystopian vision of 'Five Years', in which there is only five years until Earth's demise, or Bolan's idyllic pastoral past. If Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, the Bopping Elf and the Warlock of Love were the carnival masks, and if Bolan and Bowie's shifting and counter-hegemonic gender and sexual identities were the 'world upside down' and reversed power relations of carnival, then by extension, the Otherworlds they created were the carnival space itself – the liminal and ephemeral space in which all of this was enacted.

As I discussed in chapter one, the carnival space is that space where the transgressions and subversions of the world upside-down, the mask, and the lower bodily stratum are free to express themselves. It is the liberatory space of laughter and excess that permits the masses a 'social safety valve'. Without the carnival space itself, these carnival elements could not exist with such potency. As such, the carnival space is the very locus of "the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance".<sup>201</sup> This utopian realm acts as a counterpoint to conservative, hegemonic, oppressive everyday culture, showing us how things *could* be. It is the space of 'carnival consciousness', where the liberation from hierarchies and hegemonic rules is all the more of a "fantastic nature and utopian radicalism"<sup>202</sup> *because* of carnival's temporary nature – enacting, in Jameson's terms, a critical utopia that critiques the

---

<sup>200</sup> Gardiner, 'Prosaics and Carnival', 66.

<sup>201</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 9.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

oppressions and deficiencies of the present-day. As I also outlined in chapter one, Stam (1989) notes that the carnival space is where marginality and otherness are permitted to express themselves, and further, that carnival is “the oppositional culture of the oppressed”.<sup>203</sup> Gardiner (1993) argues that, indeed, the space of carnival allows us to visualise an alternative to the realities of the present day, and that this space is one that is radical and transformative,<sup>204</sup> and in Dentith’s (2004) terms, it is a space that has already realised those radical possibilities.<sup>205</sup> That is, it is an already-realised utopian space that, for the world *outside* that space, represents, in Jameson’s (2005) words, “a rattling of the bars and an intense spiritual concentration and preparation for another stage which has not yet arrived”.<sup>206</sup> What is at stake then, in Bolan and Bowie’s *Otherworlds*, is the enactment of a radically different ‘world’ that subverts the power relations of the present-day reality *outside* of that carnival space. That is, these *Otherworlds* are the spaces in which Bolan and Bowie’s alternate identities, alternate gender identities and ambiguous sexualities are at the top of an inverted hierarchy, in that Bolan and Bowie, as the carnivalesque, *Otherworldly* figures, are also the *central* figures of these alternate realities. As radically ambiguously-gendered men of non-binary sexualities, they are neither, within these carnivalesque spaces, marginalised nor oppressed. Rather, as the central figures of their *Otherworlds*, they are free to perform these gender and sexual identities, and these alternate personae, without interference from hegemonic institutions such as the church or state; and furthermore, within the carnival space, their ambiguity is not questioned – rather, it simply exists. Jameson’s work on the ‘critical utopia’ is a useful extension of Bakhtin’s ideas here, particularly in relation to science fiction – and especially in the sense that it is Bolan and Bowie’s construction of these *Otherworldly*, alternate realities that gives space and expression to their radical identities. With this in mind, I will refer to both Bakhtin and Jameson throughout this chapter. First, however, I will provide some cultural context for Bolan and Bowie’s *Otherworlds* by outlining the rise in popularity of ‘*Otherworlds*’ in 1970s

---

<sup>203</sup> Stam, *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*, 95.

<sup>204</sup> Gardiner, ‘Prosaics and Carnival’, 35.

<sup>205</sup> Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*, 76.

<sup>206</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 233.

popular media, and placing Bolan and Bowie within this movement toward the 'space age' and the Otherworldly.

### **Otherworlds in 1970s Popular Media**

It is worth noting that the late 1960s and the early 1970s saw the release of two notable and influential British, dystopian science fiction films - Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971). *2001* was an influence on Bowie's 'Space Oddity', along with the recent developments in space travel, which had become a reality in 1969 with NASA's manned Apollo moon landing. British television also screened a number of futuristic science fiction shows in the 1970s including *Doctor Who* (although this was already a long-running show before the 1970s, beginning in 1963), *Doomwatch* (1970-1972), *Timeslip* (1970), *The Tomorrow People* (1973-1979), and later in the decade, *Survivors* (1975-1977), *Blake's 7* (1978-1981), *Quatermass* (1979) and *Sapphire and Steel* (1979-1982) - although this latter series falls into the 'psi fi' category. In the late 1960s, *The Prisoner* had also depicted a dystopian 'alternate reality' - Bolan's contemporary, Steve Harley, has recounted his and Bolan's repeat viewings of this show during the 1970s, and it is likely to have been at least a peripheral influence on Bolan's ideas of a unique world existing outside of the everyday. There had also been an increasing interest in fantasy worlds, the new age, and occultism during the 1960s and 1970s - and in particular among the counterculture, and, by extension, in rock music. From the 1960s, psychedelic rock had invited audiences into Otherworlds that were more 'interior' in nature<sup>207</sup> - in particular, there were several well-known songs from the period that made reference to the 'Otherworlds' invoked by the consumption of hallucinogenic substances. Some notable examples include The Beatles' 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' (1967), Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit' (1967), and The Small Faces' 'Itchycoo Park' (1967). The Beatles' 'Yellow Submarine' (1966) and 'Octopus's Garden' (1969) also created psychedelic story-worlds akin to children's stories, and in between these Beatles' releases, Donovan had released 'Atlantis' (1968), an ode to the lost undersea world of the same name. Countercultural music venues in

---

<sup>207</sup> Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 16.

the late 1960s included 'UFO' and 'Middle Earth', and Tolkienesque and/or fantasy themes came to appear in popular releases such as Led Zeppelin's 'Battle of Evermore' (1971) - a Tolkienesque narrative referring to the 'Queen of Light' and 'Prince of Peace', as well as runes and dragons. Later in the 1970s, Queen's *Queen II* (1974) contained numerous fantasy narratives including 'White Queen (As It Began)', 'Ogre Battle', 'The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke', 'The March of the Black Queen' and 'Seven Seas of Rhye'. As I noted in the previous chapter's discussion of alternate sexualities (and in relation to alternate personae), these movements can all be seen as counter-hegemonic moves to escape conventional, conservative, everyday reality. Bowie drew upon contemporary developments in space travel, and upon science fiction, as well as at times more 'fantasy'-themed narratives, to provide a critical reflection on the 'here and now' of 1970s Britain, while Bolan crafted a 'mystic sci fi' Otherworld that provided a form of escape from the rigours of everyday reality. In both cases, the Otherworlds presented by Bolan and Bowie were the counter-hegemonic fictional 'narrative spaces' that their 'alternate personae' inhabited.

### **Bolan's Alternate Reality: 'Mystic Sci Fi' Utopia**

Bolan's Otherworld combines a kind of nostalgia for a fantasy, pastoral, fairytale imaginary past, combined with futuristic science fiction imagery that is, ultimately, a form of carnivalesque critical utopia. Nature itself, in Bolan's otherworld, is a carnivalesque space of festivity and an escape from the everyday, departing from the contemporary reality of urban alienation, the modern technologies of life under capitalism, and from the power cuts, IRA bombings, and unemployment and industrial action that I mentioned earlier. Stars, planets and the cosmos, in Bolan's mystical world, also represent an escape from the mundane, and I will return to this point soon. But first, in regards to fantasy and fairy tale's relationship with the utopian, Jameson makes several points that are useful in relation to Bolan's utilisation of such imagery. Dating the fantasy genre back to 1895 with Wells' *Time Machine*, Jameson notes that fantasy is strongly influenced by medieval (as opposed to Renaissance) content, organised around an "ethical binary of good and

evil”<sup>208</sup> and assigning a fundamental role to magic, which functions as “a figure for the enlargement of human powers and their passage to the limit, their actualisation of everything latent and virtual in the stunted human organism of the present”.<sup>209</sup> Given Bolan’s penchant for lyrical content relating to wizards, witches and aspects of occult magic, not to mention Bolan’s own media persona as an initiate of sorts, it is clear that the fantasy aspects of his work reflect, in Jameson’s words, “a well-nigh visceral sense of the chemical deficiencies of our own present”<sup>210</sup> (or, at least, of the present in which glam rock emerged). The “imaginary compensation”<sup>211</sup> at work in Bolan’s pastoral, supernaturally-infused imaginary is equally present in his future-oriented, ‘space age’ aesthetic – which David Bowie brings to something of a culmination in the character of Ziggy Stardust.

Auslander briefly notes Bolan’s tendency towards pastoralism and fantasy,<sup>212</sup> and he also identifies a few instances of science fiction in the musical output of T. Rex. Exploring this further, what can be found at the heart of Bolan’s idyllic fantasy world is a leaning towards not just fantasy in its generic sense, but also towards paganistic themes, esoteric magick, ‘cosmic mysticism’, exoticism, science fiction, and an overall sense of fantastical escapism. The result is a crossing over and patching together of themes and genres which, taken together, form a particularly idiosyncratic ‘Bolanic Otherworld’. As I have mentioned, the development of this fantasy world is, in large part, influenced by the countercultural British folk music scene of the late 1960s, which itself drew upon mystical themes relating to ancient spirituality, particularly Celtic paganism, and to the notion of England as ancient ‘Albion’ or ‘Avalon’. Bolan’s lyrical content, at least in part, draws from a range of spiritual or esoteric belief systems – most notably, those of Celtic paganism (including druidism), ancient Egyptian cults, astrology, and the more contemporary ‘New Age’ cults, which I will also return to later in this chapter. In terms of literary influences, one must look directly to fantasy authors such as

---

<sup>208</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 58.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 73.

Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, and also to children's authors such as Lewis Carroll. Children's literature, with its roots in fairytale, formed a distinct part of the Bolan fantasy world – particularly in regard to anthropomorphic characters and 'fairy story'-style narration.

In the Tyrannosaurus Rex years, Bolan's musical style could be described as 'idiosyncratic folk music', Bolan playing the acoustic guitar and backed by bongo player Steve Peregrine Took. Took's name was, of course, a pseudonym taken directly from Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. In bestowing the name of a hobbit character ('Peregrine Took') upon his bandmate, it is clear that Bolan consciously set out to separate himself and his musical project from everyday mundane reality, and to situate himself firmly within the realm of fantasy. In keeping with this separation from the 'everyday', Bolan's vocal style was particularly unconventional, as I noted in chapter two. His lyrical content, additionally, painted pictures of scenes (usually naturalistic) and characters (often 'magical') including elves, fauns, prophets and wizards. In connection with the pastoral aspect of both T. Rex and Tyrannosaurus Rex, it should be noted that this aspect of his lyrics extends beyond the pastoral itself in a way that is actually more in keeping with nature-based paganism. This sense of 'paganism' in Bolan's music incorporates magick and a spiritual connection to nature. 'By The Light of a Magical Moon' (*A Beard of Stars*, 1970), for example, refers to dancing barefoot and talking with 'the elders', the 'magical moon' as an object of pagan ritual (that is, in relation to lunar magic). Bolan's lyrics also connote a 'cosmic link' between the planets and the earth, through references to astrology (another aspect of pagan and New Age beliefs), which relies upon an interconnectedness between all things, as well as to tales of alien visitors (in 'The Visit', 1970, and 'Planet Queen', 1971). In relation to this sense of 'cosmic interconnectedness', "the silent scriptures of the trees" in 'Pon A Hill' imply more than just an appreciation of nature. What is implied is a land that goes back to ancient times, its natural landscape imbued with spiritual knowledge. This in itself extends beyond the purely naturalistic to a mode of thought that is pagan, or more specifically, druidic – at least in the sense of this

religion's belief in animism.<sup>213</sup> Here, Bolan's world is a reversal of the contemporary, material world of capitalist society and ideology - that is, rather than being narrative spaces in which the song's characters are subordinate to the power relations of contemporary capitalist society, these characters instead exist in a world where societal relations are for the most part non-hierarchical, existing in a holistic relationship with all of natural (and supernatural) existence - from the landscape, to its creatures, to the cosmos - as opposed to existing in relationship to the economic market. That is, it is a 'second life' that stands in opposition to the "prevailing truth" and established order.<sup>214</sup>

Another example of this occurs in the song 'Beltane Walk' (*T. Rex*, 1970), which refers to a walk the protagonist takes, during the pagan season of Beltane, and the people he meets along the way, all of whom exist in this idyllic, utopian world. This song, furthermore, moves further into the 'magical' realm of Bolan's otherworld, as does 'Ride A White Swan' (non-album release, 1970), which refers to Beltane, druids, spellcasting, and black cats as 'familiar'. Several of Bolan's songs also make references to pagan runes, even as late as 'Soul of My Suit' (*Dandy in The Underworld*, 1977). It is clear that these many references to pagan traditions, from the early stages of Bolan's career, form part of the basis of his 'otherworldliness' - and it is magic that, in Bolan's Otherworld, is a force with the power to enact change and radical transformation, as well as having the potential to override contemporary hierarchies, power relations and institutions, should it happen to actually exist (and, as I discussed in chapter two, Bolan publicly asserted that it did). In Bakhtin's terms, then, this magical Otherworld embodies the carnival spirit, which "frees human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities".<sup>215</sup> Extending his Otherworld into other mystical and magical traditions, Bolan also draws several times upon the exoticism of Ancient Egypt. For example, in 'Afghan Woman' (*My People Were Fair and Had Sky in their Hair... But Now They're Content to Wear Stars on Their Brows*, 1968), he refers to "Rameses born with platinum future" - Rameses being a Dynasty of Egyptian pharaohs), and

---

<sup>213</sup> By this, I am referring to the belief that features of the natural world (including trees) contain living spirits.

<sup>214</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

the 'golden cat' referred to in 'The Motivator' (*Electric Warrior*, 1971), is a recurring figure from earlier songs such as 'Eastern Spell' (*Prophets, Seers and Sages*).<sup>216</sup> This golden cat appears to refer to a figurine of an ancient Egyptian cat deity, likely to have been Bastet, the goddess and protector of women, who is often represented as a cat figure.<sup>217</sup> As a goddess invoked in magic rituals, Bastet's presence in Bolan's carnivalesque world represents, as I previously mentioned, the transformative potential of magic to enact radical change; and as Jameson notes in relation to the utopian elements of fantasy, "... the charm of the world of magic [...] offers that unique 'Luft Aus Andersen Planeten', that air from other planets [...] that signals some momentary release from the force of gravity of this one."..<sup>218</sup> – that is, a release from everyday hierarchies, institutions and hegemonic power relations.

This release from the realities of everyday life is prevalent also in Bolan's science fiction-themed otherworlds. Although the futurism of these sci fi themes may appear at first to be at odds with Bolan's other more naturalistic concepts, they may also be seen as an extension of the 'cosmic' themes that stem from the ideas of druidism, lunar magick and astrology. That is, the concept of interconnectedness between earth and cosmos, in the diegetic world of Bolan's songwriting, extends to and incorporates science fiction elements such as alien visitors and UFOs. 'Planet Queen' refers to flying saucers, and this is placed in juxtaposition with the objects mentioned in the lines "Dragon head, machine of lead/Cadillac king, dancer in the midnight": the 'dragon head' in this case bears the double meaning of, firstly, that of a mythical dragon, and secondly, that of the *astrological* 'dragon's head' (and tail). This particular astrological formation, in Vedic astrology and New Age thought, represents the position of the North (and South) nodes of the moon, and these points are noted in astrology as being particularly 'karmic'. Bolan's tendency to draw upon such concepts such as 'karma' demonstrates his engagement with the 'esoteric' and 'otherworldly' – further adding to the holistic nature of his carnivalesque narrative space.

---

<sup>216</sup> This song also appears on *The Beginning of Doves*, a collection of demos recorded by Bolan prior to 1969 and the recordings of Tyrannosaurus Rex.

<sup>217</sup> In 'Eastern Spell', the golden cats are referred to as being in temples, and in 'The Motivator', the golden cat is kept in a bedroom.

<sup>218</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 71.

Further to this, these cosmic linkages also branch back again to the fantasy genre, along with fairy tale and its naturalistic, pastoral spaces. The album *My People Were Fair and Had Sky in Their Hair... But Now They're Content to Wear Stars on Their Brows* (1968) bears a dedication "to Aslan and the Old Narnians". The title itself connotes a cosmic merging of cosmos and human, and the mention of characters from C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* entrenches Bolan in the realm of fantasy literature – a genre that is escapist, and as I have discussed elsewhere, imbued with the Utopian 'wish'. 'Woodland Story' on *Unicorn*, read aloud by radio DJ John Peel, brings Bolan's fairy tale anthropomorphic world to life in detail, as Lionel Lark and Kingsley Mole embark upon a quest to a magical lily pond, encounter an elf, and end their day drinking tea from acorn cups and going to sleep under spider web sheets and woolly moss blankets. Their lives are intrinsically linked with nature and with magic. This nature-based fairy tale and fantasy inclination, furthermore, is part of the 'Utopian wish' embodied in Bolan's work. As Jameson states,

The content of the Utopian form will emerge from that other form or genre which is the fairy tale: if not a purer form of collective desire, then at least a more plebeian one, emerging from the life world of the peasantry, of growth and nature, cultivation and the seasons, the earth and the generations [...] the Utopian form carries within it the memory of the land and the village, this half-forgotten trace of the experience of peasant solidarity and collectivity.<sup>219</sup>

This collective solidarity, then, is reflected in the world of *Unicorn* (1969), featuring songs such as 'Cat Black (The Wizard's Hat)' and fantasy figures such as 'Warlord of the Royal Crocodiles' which abounds with pastoral-Arcadianism with its references to hills, birds, the seasons, barley fields, moors, vineyards, gulleys and streams, groves, nests, trees, and mists. The unicorn of the title itself is a mythical beast, and thus the album's overall framing is in terms of fantasy. 'The Sea Beasts', however, also includes the repeated lines "UFO, UFO you are" – extending the song (and the album's) fantasy world back into space. The back cover of the

---

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 85.

album pictures Bolan and Steve Peregrine Took with a book on the Cottingley fairies,<sup>220</sup> along with *Blake: The Complete Writings*, and books by mystical poet Khalil Gibran. The combination of lyrical imagery and these particular photographic signifiers are (a) particularly mystical, (b) literary, and (c) engaged with the past, in the sense of both British folklore and ‘spiritual’ thought (via Blake’s poetry). Here, Bolan’s narrative space represents a further escape from mundane reality – again, presenting a form of liberation from the established, hegemonic order and life under capitalism, offering alternative potentialities.

*Prophets, Seers and Sages, the Angels of the Ages* (1968) is yet another mystical album title, referring both to human beings with extraordinary capabilities and to otherworldly beings of mystical origins. The song ‘Stacey Grove’ on this album is about a “forecaster of eyes” (that is, a prophet) whose home is “decked out like a pagan temple to Zeus”. ‘Aznageel the Mage’ is another magical character on this album, further emphasising the link between Bolan and magic. In the fantasy tale ‘The Friends’, the protagonist beseeches a Satyr/faun to befriend him; and the epic (yet almost monotone) ‘The Scenescof Dynasty’ recounts the killing of an evil, gargantuan monster – an exaggerated grotesque figure who scoffs at the groovy youth scene. The giant creature, named the ‘Scenescof’, represents all that is conservative, hegemonic, hierarchical, and old – the very things that carnival sets out to subvert, destroy, and replace with the new. Thus, the Scenescof is defeated by the song’s young protagonists, Marc and Suzy, who by the counter-hegemonic power of magic have been astrally transported inside him. After journeying through his insides and cells, the Scenescof shrinks and Marc and Suzy are able to slice him from ear to ear – destroying not only the Scenescof but all that he represents. Marc and Suzy’s victory represents the idea that youth, vitality and fun can win the day – overthrowing the conservative everyday world and its hierarchical power relations. Additionally, the triumph of good over evil here follows the moral pattern of fantasy narratives, and, additionally, incorporates the carnivalesque themes of the devouring grotesque figure that embodies both life and death (and rebirth). The old, here, has given way to the new in a radical

---

<sup>220</sup> The ‘Cottingley fairies’, the so-called fairies seen in a number of photographs with two young English girls (taken around 1917), were exposed in later years to be a hoax. During the late 1960s and 1970s, however, many still believed in the authenticity of the photographs.

transformation that takes place from within the monster's insides – a carnivalesque inversion that turns the world not only upside down, but inside out. In this 'world upside down' reversal, the death of the Scenescof represents, in Bakhtin's terms, a "remodelling' of the world from the past to the future. It is the world passing through the phase of death on the way to birth",<sup>221</sup> representing the possibility of a more utopian future.

Although *Electric Warrior* (1971) is widely credited with being Bolan's first electric and glam album per se, *T. Rex* (1970) is in fact the album that marks the beginning of his electric period. The cover image features Bolan and Mickey Finn, posed in a green garden with their faces painted white, and Bolan posing for the first time with an electric guitar. While there is an element of the pastoral and the pagan in the garden setting, the stark white face makeup renders Bolan and Finn otherworldly, ethereal and supernatural. Fantasy and esotericism are the keynotes of this album – the opening track, 'The Children of Rarn' refers to a fictional religious cult or following. The 'master' of this following is a character by the name of Rarn, whose face is "young and old and silvery gold", while his followers, the 'children of Rarn', are characterised as 'seekers of space'. The song ends with an extended vocalisation of the syllable "Om", which, in Hinduism and esoteric Buddhism, is considered to represent and carry the vibration of God and everything in the entire universe. It is clear from the outset, then, that the theme of this album is particularly 'otherworldly', constructing another holistic, interconnected narrative space. The song 'Suneye' refers to elves, tree wizards and a creature called "Lithon the black, the rider of stars", a fantasy creation. 'Diamond Meadows' and 'Beltane Walk', previously mentioned, continue the pastoral and pagan thematics. In terms of science fiction, 'The Visit' recounts the arrival of a spaceship in the middle of the day, turning the sky black and shadowing the moon. In the course of the 'H.P. Lovecraft'-style narrative, a clawed alien creature steals the protagonist's heart before the spaceship departs. This is a particularly dark moment in Bolan's otherwise idyllic utopian reality, and it is interesting to note that this song takes place within a present-day narrative space, rather than in a past or future time; hence, in Bolan's 'world', the present-day is fraught with the

---

<sup>221</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 412.

possibility of invasion, danger and predatory, deathly violence visited upon the unsuspecting innocent. As an ‘exception to the rule’ of Bolan’s otherwise utopian, carnivalesque spaces, ‘The Visit’ demonstrates perhaps *why* a radical, oppositional carnival consciousness, and ‘escape’ from the present day, is so desirable – allegorically presenting a critique of the oppressions of the present-day. Returning, however, to a more utopian theme, the album’s final track is a pagan/fantasy fairytale titled ‘The Wizard’, in which the protagonist meets a wizard who teaches him the mysteries of life. This story, incidentally, has been taken to cross over with real life, not least due to Bolan’s own press interviews in which he claimed to have spent time with a wizard in Paris, learning the secrets of the occult and black magic.<sup>222</sup> The narrative world of the song, then, thereby amplifies these aspects of Bolan’s otherworldly persona, which I discussed in chapter two. Given that ‘The Wizard’ is the conceptual resolution or bookend of the album, which began with a paean to ‘Rarn’ and included a disturbing cautionary tale in the form of ‘The Visit’, we might take this song as a reaffirmation of the importance of the otherworldly – and in the process, reaffirming magic as an oppositional force, and representing the carnivalesque ‘rattling of the bars’ that I mentioned earlier in the chapter.

The title of Bolan’s ‘breakthrough’ glam album, *Electric Warrior*, refers not only to his switch from primarily acoustic musical arrangements to the electric guitar, but also to Carlos Castaneda’s<sup>223</sup> ‘New Age’ cult in which the female initiates (who were, primarily, Castaneda’s sexual partners) were known as ‘Electric Warriors’ or ‘the witches’.<sup>224</sup> In the song ‘Girl’, from the same album, Bolan makes further reference to Castaneda’s cult via the reference to an “electric witch” – thereby including in his carnivalesque otherworld a contemporary example of a real-life counter-hegemonic group of people (even if Castaneda’s cult was in itself problematic in terms of its sexual power relations). The album contains further

---

<sup>222</sup> See Paytress, *Bolan*, 46–47, 54.

<sup>223</sup> An anthropologist, Carlos Castaneda was, at the time of Bolan’s *Electric Warrior*, known for his publications on his apprenticeship with a traditional shaman, *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* (1968) and *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan* (1971). These publications were later disputed to be works of fiction, but continue to be influential upon New Age thought.

<sup>224</sup> Amy Wallace, one of Castaneda’s followers, wrote in her memoirs, “The title I initially received – that of the ‘Electric Warrior,’ a mythic sorceress of *non-pareil* gifts – was given to a number of women upon joining the group”. See Amy Wallace, *Sorcerer’s Apprentice: My Life With Carlos Castaneda* (Berkley, CA: Frog Ltd, 2003), 401.

songs referring to the cosmos, including 'Mambo Sun', 'Planet Queen' and 'Cosmic Dancer', which Bolan stated was a song about reincarnation. The album's final track, 'Life's A Gas', refers to planets, stars, and turning the song's addressee into a (pagan) priestess – again, constructing a world in which several belief systems exist and link together. *The Slider* (1973), despite being Bolan's most outright pop-glam album with electric, upbeat songs with a basic repetitive structure, contains further references to a 'magic' world in the form of the 'Mystic Lady' (a "riding, sliding Sorceress"), 'Rabbit Fighter's "Moondog" who is described as "just a prophet til the end", and the otherworldly, sci-fi inspired 'Ballrooms of Mars'. Once more, Bolan here narrates an off-world space that expresses a carnivalesque, utopian desire to escape the mundane social and economic realities – the ballroom of Mars being a celebratory, even if ethereal, space of dancing, sexuality, rock n' roll icons, and seemingly infinite youth. That is, it is a festive, carnival space offering a 'second life' of counter-hegemonic freedom and abundance.

*Bolan's Zip Gun* (1975) contained retro and retro-futuristic titles such as 'Zip Gun Boogie' and 'Girl in the Thunderbolt Suit'; *Zinc Alloy and the Hidden Riders of Tomorrow* (1974) had seen Bolan adopt a whole new science-fiction themed persona altogether. *Dandy in The Underworld* (1977), Bolan's final album, also contains otherworldly themes, most notably in the form of classical mythology. The title track in particular makes reference to the Greek myth of Orpheus' journey to the Underworld. It is probably not coincidental that Orpheus was famed for his music and poetry, areas which Bolan himself was known for. Hence, in linking himself (the 'dandy' of the album's title) with the figure of Orpheus, Bolan frames himself and his persona or 'mask of the moment' in terms of grandiose, epic mythology.<sup>225</sup> His penultimate album, and its title *Futuristic Dragon* (1976), is in itself a culmination of his own particular 'mixed aesthetic', combining sci-fi futurism with the figure of the dragon – an 'organic' creature of medieval fantasy. This combination is a particularly apt one in regards to T. Rex's escapist, 'symbolic Other' mode of expression. As Jameson notes,

---

<sup>225</sup> The album title can also be paralleled with the title of the Jacques Offenbach operetta, *Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858).

... the dragon can be seen as the equivalent of the spaceship or of teleportation in SF. Yet as a living being the dragon is also able to incarnate sheer otherness, so that its symbolic capacities well exceed those of inanimate machinery.<sup>226</sup>

As if to demonstrate this exact point, the illustration on the *Futuristic Dragon* album cover features a winged warrior Bolan, riding a ferocious dragon in full flight past a bright yellow sun; the distinctly reptilian creature snorts a stream of cloud-like smoke from its nostrils, the exhalation wrapping itself like a tentacle around the sun. The image is at once a collage of past and future, earth and cosmos. The album's introductory track lyrically demonstrates this synthesis of futurism and fantastical past:

Deep beneath an ancient shadow  
 Stunned with age and too much wisdom  
 Reclining in glass, with eyes to steep  
 Relentless dimensions of quadraphonic sleep  
 Dwelt the wild grinding cyclopean pagan  
 Screaming destruction in sheer dazzling raiment  
 A thunderbolt master a 'lectronic saviour  
 A gold galactic raver, the Futuristic Dragon...

This synthesis of an ancient world of 'wisdom', which is fully corporeal, uncontainable and destructive, with a world of 'quadraphonic', electronic, futuristic technology, is another example of Bolan's persona inhabiting an Otherworld that is both past and future, sci fi and fantasy, and *not* of everyday 1970s Britain. With the 'futuristic dragon' being both a saviour and a 'raver', not to mention of the future (and hence of the 'new', as opposed to the old and conservative), this wild, otherworldly figure is hence a figure of progressive change, ushering in a radical new social formation.

*Born to Boogie* (1973) can be seen as a filmic culmination of the various 'Bolan' themes that had been presented at that point, incorporating music with poetry, paganism, magic, and fairytales into one rock concert film. Carnavalesque festivity and laughter further differentiate the film from the everyday; as Bakhtin notes,

---

<sup>226</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 63–64.

laughter “had been eliminated in the Middle Ages from official cult and ideology”,<sup>227</sup> but found expression during the feasts and (often sacrilegious) parodies of carnival – which, again, provided a ‘second life’ of liberation. This is exactly what we see in *Born to Boogie*, with its concert scenes being interspersed with fantasy vignettes: humorous rock n roll poetry in a Cadillac with a giant mouse; a pastel-themed ‘Tutti Frutti’ performance with Elton John on piano, Bolan’s head *inside* the piano, and clowns; and an extended Mad Hatter’s Tea Party scene. The anthropomorphic world of Tyrannosaurus Rex, such as that of the Lionel Lark and Kingsley Mole’s adventure, is given cinematic life in the form of Ringo Starr dressed as a giant mouse, squeaking alongside Bolan in the passenger seat of a Cadillac; and a life-sized stuffed tiger sits in the ‘Tutti Frutti’ performance scene. A giant white sausage floats in the background of the Cadillac scene, and a caped dwarf appears in a flash of lightning and begins to eat the car’s rear view mirror.

Most strikingly in regard to Bolan’s presentation of a pastoral, fantasy, fairytale Otherworld, the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party scene is a contemporary, rock n’ roll, carnivalesque version of the Lewis Carroll story *Alice in Wonderland*, in which Bolan (as the Mad Hatter), several nuns, Ringo Starr, and an aristocratic vampire (a “man of blood”, as described in the film) played by Mickey Finn feast on burgers prepared by an English butler, and drink lemonade through coloured straws. The scene is a formal, upper-class, ‘high tea’ garden party with china tea cups, white wrought iron garden furniture and lace tablecloths. Leafy trees and a pond are in the background, a string orchestra providing genteel musical ambience. This upper-class gentility however, is undercut by the improbability of a formal butler grilling burgers on a barbecue, shaded by a garden umbrella bearing the logo of Saxon Lager. One may also notice that the string orchestra is not playing a classical piece - in fact, what they are playing is a version of T. Rex’s ‘Hot Love’. The butler is played by well-known children’s television actor Geoffrey Bayldon, who played 11<sup>th</sup> century time-travelling wizard Catweazle. The *Catweazle* series screened on ITV in 1970 and 1971, and Bayldon’s casting as the butler is both a nod to the television series and a reference to Bolan’s own ‘magical’ persona. Bayldon, in

---

<sup>227</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 82.

pantomime style, introduces the scene behind him – emphasising a ‘storybook’ aesthetic as he describes the characters. The tea party guests are dressed in crisp black and white suits, Finn sporting a thin, aristocratic moustache and bow tie. The black and white spots on his bow tie undercut the formality of his appearance, however, as does his ‘painted’ white face makeup (which Bolan also wears). Nonsense poetry is recited, contributing to the vignette’s sense of ‘madcap spontaneity’. The acoustic medley, which Bolan performs sitting cross-legged on the grass in front of the orchestra, is a series of songs with sexual overtones (‘Jeepster’, ‘Get It On’ and ‘The Slider’) which are, at least in the sense of class-based propriety, incongruous with the orchestra arrangement and high tea setting. The sequence, by nature of the outdoor setting and Bolan’s cross-legged position on the grass, also pays homage to his association with the pastoral and with nature-based paganism. The medley is intercut with close ups of the tea party guests enjoying the fare of hamburgers and lemonade, and of Bolan seated at the table articulating mischievous facial expressions and playful gestures such as wobbling his head, winking, beckoning, and grinning. Upon completing the medley, seated once again at the tea party, he removes a piece of written poetry from the band of his Mad Hatter’s hat and passes it to the butler for recitation – the building excitement of the poem acting as an introduction to the next live concert scene.

Within this sequence, then, Bolan is presented all at once as a ‘cheeky elf’ figure, cross-legged hippie, irreverent rock star, ‘rock n’ roll aristocracy’, storybook character, and unconventional poet, who lives within a pastoral, fairytale past. The pastoral setting of the tea party evokes a nostalgia for the past, and the fairytale imagery connotes a time that was perhaps more innocent – that is, the world of childhood, as opposed to the contemporary, adult world. *Alice in Wonderland* itself is a story populated with fantastical and anthropomorphic creatures, and we can be certain that Bolan here is linking his own Bolanic fantasy world with that of Lewis Carroll’s. However in juxtaposition with the seemingly childlike and innocent setting, and as we have seen, are the sexually-themed songs, as well as images of bearded men dressed as nuns feasting at the table, and Mickey Finn’s character gorging on berries with greater and greater fervour, until the juice streams down his chin like a vampire drinking blood. The sequence is a

carnavalesque feast of gender reversal which parodies the institution of the Church (either the Catholic Church, the Church of England, or both) and its traditionally conservative ideology, along with connotations of the expression of sexuality, and a demonstration of excess via the over-indulgence in vast amounts of food. The parallel here with the pre-Lenten carnival and its gender reversals, letting off of steam, counter-hegemonic expression against authority, and demonstrations of excess is strikingly apparent. Along with the scene's carnivalesque parody of the 'official' institution of the Church, the surreal combination of nuns with a mouse and a 'vampire' also represents, in Bakhtin's theory, the dissolution of both boundaries and 'distance' between carnival participants. Moreover, the excessive consumption of food, or in other words, the excessive carnival feasting, also represents a carnivalesque liberation from 'norms of etiquette'.<sup>228</sup> The androgynous, ethereal, irreverent and sexual Mad Hatter is the host and the head of proceedings, presiding over his guests, the other carnival participants. These guests – the vampire and the nuns of both genders – represent an inverted hierarchy and 'world upside down' gender reversal: that is, the androgynous, ambiguous sexuality of the Mad Hatter (and hence of Bolan), which would be marginalised in the 'real', much more conservative world, is here privileged; and the conventional gender coding of nuns as female is also dispensed with in this space. At Bolan's Mad Hatter's tea party, and by extension in his carnivalesque world, the conventional gender roles and seriousness of official culture is done away with as these nuns enjoy the festivity, with its party food of hamburgers, coloured drinking straws, and the music of T. Rex. Convention, then, is overthrown in an expression of utopian freedom and abundance.

When we compare Bolan's Otherworld with that of David Bowie, we can see that these two artists presented alternate realities that were in many ways strikingly similar, yet in other ways vastly different, in terms of their themes and aesthetics – and so in the next section, I will discuss Bowie's unique form of carnivalesque Otherworld, which was also a combination of science fiction and mysticism – but set much closer to the present-day, and as such, imbued with an even more direct sense of critique for those present-day realities.

---

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 10.

### **Bowie's Alternate Reality: Near-Future Sci Fi Dystopia**

Bowie once remarked that “We couldn’t have pounced without Marc Bolan. The little imp opened the door. What was so great, however, was that we knew he hadn’t got it quite right”.<sup>229</sup> Bearing this in mind, it becomes all the more obvious that Bowie’s alternate reality extended upon those themes that Bolan had begun to develop. In terms of the Otherworldly, Bowie’s alternate reality was oftentimes that of outer space, as in ‘not of this earth’ – literally an alternate space – and also that of a near-future reality on Earth. While in chapter three I explored the ways in which Bowie’s alien persona reflected an alternate sexuality that we might view as utopian, I will now examine David Bowie’s predominantly science fiction imaginary (or at least this was its primary theme in Bowie’s glam years), which was decidedly dystopian and infused with a sense of alienation. In regard to Bowie’s science fiction and sometimes mystical Otherworld, I will focus primarily on Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust incarnation – however I will also make reference to the pre-Ziggy tracks ‘Space Oddity’, and to the albums *The Man Who Sold the World*, *Hunky Dory*, *Aladdin Sane*, and *Diamond Dogs*.

Bowie had begun narrating Otherworlds much earlier than *Ziggy Stardust* – ‘Space Oddity’ (1969) being the most striking example, which I will come back to – and it could even be said that ‘The Laughing Gnome’ (1967) refers to a crossing over of worlds (in which the song’s protagonist meets a gnome in the city). Gnomes are fantasy creatures not dissimilar to Bolan’s elves, and the narrative feature of the gnome eating roasted toadstools and drinking dandelion wine are also not dissimilar to Bolan’s Lionel Lark and Kingsley Mole’s drinking of tea from acorn cups. Bowie’s alternate realities take on a more serious tone which each album, however. *The Man Who Sold the World* (1970) contains ‘The Width of a Circle’, which tells the story of an encounter in the woods with a supernatural being, revealed as Bowie’s (or the protagonist’s) doppelgänger. There are strong parallels here with Bolan’s ‘The Wizard’ (1970): in Bolan’s song, the protagonist meets a wizard while out in the woods, and given that Bolan and Bowie were both friends and competitors, it is perhaps not surprising that there would be a cross-

---

<sup>229</sup> Auslander, *Performing Glam Rock*, 71.

pollination of ideas between them. On the same album, 'The Supermen' tells of an ancient race of 'supermen' living in a place of "mountain magic" and "weird" mystical powers, along with "sad eyed mermen" and dreams too powerful for any mortal mind. Bowie later commented that he wrote the song when he was "[pretending] that I understood Nietzsche".<sup>230</sup> *Hunky Dory*, released in 1971, contained several references to Otherworlds. When Bowie asked the question "Is there life on Mars?" (in the single 'Life on Mars'), he not only tapped into questions that were in the public consciousness about whether there may be life forms on other planets – this question being bolstered by the recent space expeditions – he also, via his alien-like appearance in the video to the song, created a world where there very well *might be*. In Bakhtin's terms, and as I have already noted in relation to Bolan's Otherworlds, what we see here, again, is the carnival spirit offering "a new outlook on the world" and "[freeing] human consciousness, thought and imagination for new potentialities"<sup>231</sup> beyond contemporary reality. Beyond this, in the press Bowie discussed the song as an expression of yearning for another life (or in Bakhtin's terms, an alternate reality or 'second life'). In 1997, he stated that the song's protagonist "finds herself disappointed with reality ... that although she's living in the doldrums of reality, she's being told that there's a far greater life somewhere, and she's bitterly disappointed that she doesn't have access to it".<sup>232</sup> As the young woman in the song attempts to escape her everyday reality into an alternate reality of the "silver screen", she realises that even the film she watches has become mundane:

Now she walks through her sunken dream  
 To the seat with the clearest view  
 And she's hooked to the silver screen  
 But the film is a saddening bore  
 For she's lived it ten times or more...

The question at the end of the chorus then, "Is there life on Mars?" takes her internal experience of film-watching off this planet altogether. As in Bolan's alternate reality, 'space' and "that air from other planets", as Jameson would have

---

<sup>230</sup> David Buckley, *Strange Fascination: David Bowie, The Definitive Story* (London: Virgin Books, 1999), 267.

<sup>231</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 49.

<sup>232</sup> Nicholas Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie* (Richmond: Reynolds & Hearn, 2002), 109.

it, is an escape from not only the mundane, but also from the contemporary alienation, struggles and disappointment with life in 1970s Britain under nascent late capitalism.

‘Oh! You Pretty Things’, while referring to the rebellion of youth, also speaks of a dystopian present: “Look out my window and what do I see/A crack in the sky and a hand reaching down to me/All the nightmares came today/And it looks as though they’re here to stay”. However, the song provides some utopian promise, a near future in which a new race of humans will supersede the old:

Look at your children  
See their faces in golden rays  
Don’t kid yourself they belong to you  
They’re the start of a coming race  
The earth is a bitch, we’ve finished our news  
Homo sapiens have outgrown their use

The song then tells us in its chorus, “Let me make it plain, you gotta make way for the Homo Superior”. It is well-documented in Bowie fan culture that Bowie is here drawing upon Nietzsche’s idea of the Superman – but this theme of ‘Oh! You Pretty Things’ is even more interesting, for our purposes, as a precursor to the near future dystopian, pre-apocalyptic themes of the *Ziggy Stardust* album, and as a continuation of ‘The Supermen’, mentioned previously. ‘Quicksand’ continues *Hunky Dory*’s mystical themes, referring to occult magick and “divine symmetry” (while again making reference to Nietzsche’s Superman as a future possibility for humans). As with Bolan’s *Otherworlds*, what we see here is an expression of the ‘chemical deficiencies’ of the present, while looking toward an alternate, more preferable future.

Perhaps the most well-known ‘alternate reality’ or ‘second life’ that Bowie depicted was the near-future world of Ziggy Stardust, on the concept album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972). The ambiguously gendered alien that we discussed in chapters two and three is the title character of the album, whose songs depict a near future scenario. Beginning with ‘Five Years’,

we are introduced to a world with only five years left to survive, with Ziggy Stardust being a messiah figure sent to Earth in its final years. Bowie discussed the overarching narrative of the album in *Rolling Stone* magazine, in the following otherworldly terms:

Ziggy is advised in a dream by the infinites to write the coming of a Starman, so he writes 'Starman', which is the first news of hope that the people have heard. So they latch onto it immediately... The starmen that he is talking about are called the infinites, and they are black-hole jumpers [...] They just happened to stumble into our universe by black hole jumping. Their whole life is travelling from universe to universe. [...] When the infinites arrive, they take bits of Ziggy to make them real because in their original state they are anti-matter and cannot exist in our world. And they tear him to pieces on stage during the song 'Rock 'n' Roll Suicide'. As soon as Ziggy dies on stage the infinites take his elements and make themselves visible.<sup>233</sup>

This alternate, science fiction reality expresses a utopian desire for a better life beyond the present-day. Bowie's story here has obvious parallels with Bolan's *Rolling Stone* interview, which I discussed in chapter two; and beyond this, Bowie here draws another, alien, world into our present-day 'earthly life', turning the fabric of 'reality' inside out through black holes, anti-matter, and making the invisible *visible* – that is, via a carnivalesque inversion that challenges the principles of mundane existence. The otherworldly theme continues throughout the album: in 'Moonage Daydream', we are told that Ziggy is a "space invader", and we are given the imagery of ray guns and the addressee's "space face"; and, articulating opposition to 'official' culture and its institutions, 'Five Years' tells us of the "cop" who "kissed the feet of a priest", prompting a "queer" to "[throw] up at the sight of that". These lines make explicit the power relations in hegemonic, conservative society, while also registering opposition in the form of the counter-hegemonic 'queer'.

---

<sup>233</sup> William S. Burroughs and Sylvère Lotringer, *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs, 1960–1997*. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997), 231. There are strong conceptual links here between Bowie's interview and Bolan's *Rolling Stone* interview of the same period, discussed earlier in this chapter.

'Aladdin Sane (1913-1938-197?)', the title track from *Aladdin Sane* (1973), is the song perhaps most definitively critical of the socio-political conditions of 1970s Britain. The years in the title of the song are the historical years just before World War I and World War II – the 'blank space' in the third year of the title indicates that World War III is to come during the 1970s, and this is resonant with the comparisons that were being made with 1970s Britain and those historical pre-war conditions. The Sweet had also tapped into this mindset with the release of 'Blockbuster' in 1973, named after the blockbuster bomb used by the British Royal Air Force in World War II, and which opened with the sound of a siren. Roxy Music and Cockney Rebel, two bands within the 'high glam' or 'art rock' genres, were also drawing upon the images and sounds of both Weimar Germany and the Depression era – and so, we might say that by extension, glam's most pre-eminent acts were interested in engaging with the present-day social and economic conditions, while also drawing parallels with past eras – emphasising the sense of dissatisfaction and alienation inherent within the present-day. A further example of this can be seen in the album *Diamond Dogs* (1974), which opens with 'Future Legend', a future urban dystopia:

And in the death, as the last few corpses lay  
 Rotting on the slimy thoroughfare  
 The shutters lifted in inches  
 In temperance building high on poacher's hill  
 And red mutant eyes gaze down on hunger city  
 No more big wheels  
 Fleas the size of rats sucked on rats the size of cats  
 And ten thousand peoploids split into small tribes  
 Coveting the highest of the sterile skyscrapers  
 Like packs of dogs assaulting the glass fronts of love-me  
 avenue  
 Ripping and rewrapping mink and shiny silver fox, now  
 legwarmers  
 Family badge of sapphire and cracked emerald, any day  
 now  
 The year of the diamond dogs.<sup>234</sup>

---

<sup>234</sup> The parallels here with Bolan's *Futuristic Dragon* are striking, and it seems reasonable to assume that Bolan was influenced by *Diamond Dogs*. These opening title tracks are both spoken-word, set the scene (or the narrative space) for the album, and even bear similarities in their lyrical structure.

The future dystopia imagery continues most explicitly in the tracks '1984' and 'Big Brother' – both references to George Orwell's future dystopian novel, *1984*. "Beware", Bowie warns, "the savage lure of 1984". Though set in the near future, the album draws on this science fiction imagery as a critique of the present day, while also (unintentionally, yet eerily) foreshadowing the 1978 refuse collectors' industrial action, in which the streets were piled with so much rubbish it became a public health concern. Bowie's spaces here are what Jameson terms the 'critical dystopia', in that "it is in the light of some positive conception of human social possibilities that its effects are generated and from Utopian ideals its politically enabling stance derives".<sup>235</sup> These spaces that Bowie presents us with, these near-future dystopian alternate realities, are spaces in which carnival is *necessary* – a juncture, or a breaking point, at which carnival must enact some sort of radical opposition. And so, these alternate realities, for Bowie, although we might not describe them as *utopian spaces*, are the space within which carnival must erupt – and it does so in the form of Bowie's alien personae or masks, and his expression of 'world upside down' gender and sexual identity. The alien and the androgynous, here, represent a radical alternative to the oppressions of this potential future, and to the present-day. Furthermore, it represents that utopian desire for transformation, renewal and change, whether through the messianic presence and intervention of Ziggy Stardust, through a race of superhumans, or through the breaking down of norms of gender, sexuality and identity.

Visually, in terms of Bowie's music videos of the period, the two promotional videos for 'Space Oddity' are the most science fiction-influenced – that is, in relation to the science fiction Otherworlds he presented. 'Space Oddity' was first released as a single in 1969, and as I have mentioned, this made the song particularly contemporaneous with the NASA moon landing and Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. However in 1972, and following Bowie's immense popularity as Ziggy Stardust, a new promotional video was made to accompany the single for its US re-release. The original 1969 video places Bowie in two roles: 'Ground Control', and 'Major Tom'. The video's aesthetic is influenced by Kubrick's film, with its bright white, space age mise en scene and imagery, with scenes of Major Tom on

---

<sup>235</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, 198.

his mission. While Bowie has not quite yet taken up his alien persona in this video, the beginnings of his science fiction themes and aesthetics are evident. The 1972 video is quite different to this 1969 release, however – Bowie, in the 1972 clip, is now an established rock star and his persona as Ziggy Stardust is also now firmly established, and so the video makes links between Bowie's 'alien' character and 'futuristic' technology. Filmed during the recording sessions for *Aladdin Sane*, the video is set in a red-tinted, dimly-lit recording studio – and just as Roxy Music's Brian Eno's aesthetic linked to an 'alien-like' mastery of advanced technology, Bowie too is linked with music technology in this clip – and the technology, in turn, is linked with futuristic, 'space age' developments. The link between the radical alien and technological developments, we might argue, foregrounds technology as itself holding utopian promise – a means through which change and renewal is enabled, as embodied by Bowie's music. The video begins with green sound waves on a black screen. As Bowie begins to sing, for an instant the sound waves are superimposed over him. Bowie-as-Ziggy, wearing a sparkly silver top and with noticeably shaved eyebrows, is seated with an acoustic guitar. He is framed with hand-held close-ups and zoom shots in and out, giving the video a dynamic 'realism' as he sings to camera. Sound wave shots are intercut throughout the video, with each type of sound wave being the particular waveform associated with the music as it is played. Along with shots of the studio control desk, with its vast array of knobs and switches, the music and hence Bowie himself are associated with cutting edge technology. The focus on recording studio technology here (that is, in relation to this particular song) not only fetishises it, but also implies a parallel with the technology of space travel (as would have been used by the song's protagonist Major Tom), and imbues it with a sense of ethereal, space-age mystique.

As the song counts down from ten to one, we see a digital display counting down, in approximation of the countdown at the narrative's "ground control". When "lift off" is reached, the camera quickly zooms in to a close-up of Bowie's eyes, indicating dynamism, urgency, and most importantly, *instability*. This sense of instability, metaphorically, makes visible Bowie's own ability to disrupt hegemonic conventions, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality – thereby emphasising

his presence and potential as a destabilising figure. Furthermore, this shot can be paralleled with the instability of the technology that fails Major Tom, and the impending danger before him. As the music becomes distorted and urgent, the sound waves lose their perfect form and become indicative of a denser form of sound pushing through space. At the line “I’m floating in the most peculiar way”, frantic hand-held shots appear to be attempting to navigate through the empty recording studio, panning across red-tinted desks, controls and cords. High-angled shots of the studio equipment serve to further defamiliarise it, and emphasise it as ‘space age’ technology; the studio itself approximating Major Tom’s space shuttle. Here, then, Bowie is playing Ziggy-playing-Major Tom (as well as playing, through the shifting perspective of the lyrics, ‘Ground Control’), each one of these shifting personae linking with the theme of technology. As Major Tom floats through space (as implied by the song’s lyrics), the music becomes gentle, and the sound waves return to their formerly ‘even’ formation, implying that calm has been restored. However, the music speeds up and we imagine Major Tom drifting further into space, the sound waves quickly becoming more varied and appearing at times like light shooting into another dimension. Fast intercuts with unstable, hand-held shots of the recording studio and extreme close-ups of Bowie’s face imply Major Tom’s existential state of being as he is propelled into the vastness of space. Finally, and as if to emphasise the *finality* of Major Tom’s predicament, the video fades to black. While the song, and this sequence of the video, warn of the potential dangers of the technologies that carry utopian promise, Bowie also here disrupts audience expectations. That is, by refusing to provide a happier ending to this ‘space travel’ narrative, Bowie subverts conventional narrative structures by avoiding closure, leaving the way open for us to interpret ‘what happens’ to Major Tom<sup>236</sup> – and in the process, alerting us to the sense that despite the promise of technology to provide hope and advance society, in fact, all is *not* well. As such, it is Bowie’s carnivalesque personae – Ziggy Stardust and Aladdin Sane in particular – that represented opposition, disruption, and the utopian promise of renewal and radical change, amid the dangers inherent in hegemonic society and its potentially ‘dangerous’ technological developments.

---

<sup>236</sup> In ‘Ashes to Ashes’ (1980), we learn via “a rumour from Ground Control” that Major Tom is now a junkie.

## Conclusion

The Otherworlds that Bolan and Bowie presented in their albums and singles, and in Bowie's case in his promotional videos (and for Bolan, in the film *Born to Boogie*), along with the Otherworldly persona and experiences we discussed in chapter two, are carnivalesque spaces – alternate realities that the audience experiences. That is, they are spaces that transcend everyday reality, offering a 'second life of the people'. Bolan transported the mystical Otherworlds of his late 1960s countercultural phase into the glam era, and combined it with science fiction imagery to produce a 'mystic sci fi Otherworld' in which any struggles, such as that presented by the Scenescof, are almost always 'won' by the counter-hegemonic characters that live in these alternate realities. Bowie, by contrast, most often used his science fiction Otherworlds to present a magnified, future-projected vision of the contemporaneous socio-political conditions; and these Otherworlds, and the personae that inhabited them, provided both a critique and escape from those present-day realities. The Otherworlds that Bolan and Bowie presented enabled their fans to momentarily transcend the everyday, by providing the narratives, the images, and the music, of an imaginary world to escape into. Through the pastoral and the magical, through fantasy and science fiction, Bolan and Bowie's Otherworlds were anywhere but the 'here and now' of 1970s Britain. These carnivalesque spaces were a second life of the people, at a time when the 'first life', the everyday, was fraught with difficulty and caught in a moment of crisis and change. The utopian imaginary in both Bolan and Bowie's work – the idea that things could be different – can be taken as both an 'unspoken' critical comment on the deficiencies, as Jameson would have it, of the present day reality – a critical Utopia – and as an imagining of a time and place that offers a kind of liberation, whether it be an idyllic pastoral scene or a science fiction, alien-inhabited future. Bolan's Otherworld was one primarily of magic: that is, a carnivalesque space that allows for the enactment of change and transformation, through the presence of magical creatures and through the power of magic itself. Bowie's Otherworld, although it did also allow for myth and magick, was primarily a science fiction space – and it was this near-future 'alternate reality' that, in Bowie's work, allowed for the counter-hegemonic expression of discontent.

Further to this, the disruption of mundane reality within both of these artists' otherworldly spaces provided an 'social safety valve' from the status quo and from the conditions of British life that were proving to be challenging for so many. As such, both Bolan and Bowie's Otherworlds allowed for the expression of hope, a future-projected Utopian wish, that life could one day be better – offering the potential for a change, transformation, and new, more radical order of things.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored Bolan and Bowie's presentation of various carnivalesque 'alternatives' to the present-day realities of life in 1970s Britain. Their presentation of alternate identities enacted various counter-hegemonic carnival masks that destabilised the very notion of identity itself, and presented us with otherworldly personae that represented an escape from everyday life and its hegemonic power relations and social and economic inequalities. These personae also offered the possibility of transformation and radical change, and much of this was enacted through Bolan and Bowie's representation of alternate gender and sexual identities. These identities were closely bound with their 'magical' or 'alien' personae, turning the 'world upside down' from its conventional, conservative hierarchies and binary conceptions of gender and sexuality – both reflecting and taking up the then-recent social movements and changes, that had, even so, taken place in a still conservative society. Bolan and Bowie's alternate identities, then, which also encompassed these alternate expressions of gender and sexuality, further expressed a carnivalesque, utopian desire for social transformation through the otherworlds that they inhabited – alternate realities that were set in not the present-day, but in mythical pasts or near-future societies. These alternate realities, furthermore, were carnivalesque spaces *within which* counter-hegemonic expressions could be freely enacted, offering what Bakhtin terms a 'second life of the people' and the potential for radical change that extended beyond individual expressions of identity to society itself. Current scholarship on glam, and on Bowie in particular, emphasises the radical, progressive qualities of Bowie's output, and particularly in regard to gender and identity politics; my work contributes to this growing field of research, in that I additionally explore the carnivalesque, utopian elements of not only Bowie's identity politics in the 1970s, but also the ways that this politic was enacted within the carnival *space* of his Otherworldly narrative spaces. Further to this, my work here on Bolan is a new contribution to scholarly work on glam rock. By exploring the nuances of Bolan's work in terms of the

carnavalesque, my research opens the way for further discussion of Bolan, who until now has not been the subject of academic study.

Several questions arise for further research. Firstly, beyond Bolan and Bowie, there is a need to explore the ways that glam is carnivalesque as a genre. Roxy Music and Steve Harley and Cockney Rebel, for example, also enacted a desire for a reality that was different to the present day, and yet their expression of the carnivalesque was distinct from The Sweet or Slade, whose carnival aesthetic lay more in its parodic and grotesque elements. Therefore, it would be productive to explore glam's subgenres – 'high glam' and 'low glam', as they have been popularly categorised and defined – and how these subgenres might reflect differing expressions of social class and social mobility, as well as the intersections between class and masculinity in glam rock. Furthermore, it would be useful to explore the ways that gender and sexuality are represented both across the genre, and within its respective subgenres – particularly in regard to hypermasculinity, and what we might call a 'butch androgyny'. Further to this, it would be worth exploring the ways that both otherness and identity are expressed across the genre – and moreover, whether these expressions might be interpreted as either radical or essentially reactionary. Additionally, where glam rock performers (including Bolan and Bowie) presented either a retro or retro-futuristic aesthetic, the role of nostalgia, the reconstruction of a near-past, and a futuristic aesthetic are all yet to be explored, and together, all of these elements would form the basis of a much larger piece of research. Beyond this, Bolan's reconfiguration of 1950s rock n' roll, and its relationship with both the 'teenage' and the 1970s nostalgia trend, as well as with the carnivalesque, is also an area for further research.

In 2004, Bowie looked back on the cultural context in which he created Ziggy Stardust: "It just seemed so perfect within the time. It really represented what the seventies was all about". He explained further that, during the period, he'd "made a guess" at what society was going to look like: "It was the pluralistic seventies [...] you could look at things in so many different ways". Further to this, he added, "the

idea of absolutes was starting to disappear".<sup>237</sup> As we have seen, in this era of newfound plurality it was not only the political radicals or the striking workers who sought to make change, but it was also the glittering, androgynous, 'alien' Others who defied all that was conventional. Bolan and Bowie were the carnivalesque, otherworldly beings who changed the way that we thought about identity, gender, sexuality, and reality itself; and who ultimately demonstrated the utopian desire for a life that could be not simply *different* – but considerably, counter-hegemonically *better*.

---

<sup>237</sup> '7.30 Report' (Australia: ABC, 2004), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahT4xFY49w4>.

## Bibliography

- '7.30 Report'. Australia: ABC, 2004. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahT4xFY49w4>.
- Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception'. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. New York: Continuum, 1989.
- Auslander, Philip. 'Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto'. *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14, no. 1 (2004): 1–13.
- . *Performing Glam Rock: Gender and Theatricality in Popular Music*. University of Michigan Press, 2006.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.
- Beckett, Andy. *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010.
- Blair, Alison. 'Cosmic Dancer: Marc Bolan's Otherworldly Persona'. In *Global Glam: Style and Spectacle from the 1970s to the 2000s*, edited by Ian Chapman and Henry Johnson. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- . 'Marc Bolan, David Bowie and the Counter-Hegemonic Persona: Authenticity, Ephemeral Identities and the Fantastical Other'. *MEDIANZ: Media Studies Journal of Aotearoa New Zealand* 15, no. 1 (2016).
- Branch, Andrew. 'All the Young Dudes: Educational Capital, Masculinity and the Uses of Popular Music'. *Popular Music*, no. 31 (2012): 25–44.
- Brooker, Will. 'Time Again: The David Bowie Chronotope'. In *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, edited by Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond. New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Buckley, David. *Strange Fascination: David Bowie, The Definitive Story*. London: Virgin Books, 1999.
- Burroughs, William S., and Sylvère Lotringer. *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs, 1960–1997*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997.
- Cagle, Van. *Reconstructing Pop/Subculture: Art, Rock, and Andy Warhol*. Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage Publications, 1995.
- Chapman, Ian. 'Ziggy's Urban Alienation: Assembling the Heroic Outsider'. In *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, edited by Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond. New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Chapman, Ian, and Henry Johnson, eds. *Global Glam and Popular Music: Style and Spectacle from the 1970s to the 2000s*. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Cinque, Toija, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond, eds. *Enchanting David Bowie: Space Time Body Memory*. New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Crowe, Cameron. 'David Bowie: Ground Control to Davy Jones'. *Rolling Stone*, 12 February 1976. <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/ground-control-to-davy-jones-19760212>.
- Danow, David. *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995.
- Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Rebel Press, 1983.
- Devereaux, Eoin, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J. Power, eds. *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Dyer, Richard. *The Culture of Queers*. London; New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Eco, Umberto, V. V Ivanov, Mônica Rector, and Thomas A Sebeok. *Carnival!* Berlin; New York: Mouton Publishers, 1984.
- Fast, Susan. *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Forster, Laurel, and Sue Harper, eds. *British Culture and Society in the 1970s: The Lost Decade*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.

- Gardiner, Michael. 'Prosaics and Carnival'. In *Critiques of Everyday Life*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Gregory, Georgina. 'Masculinity, Sexuality and the Visual Culture of Glam Rock'. *Culture & Communication* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 35–60.
- Harker, Dave. 'Blood on the Tracks: Popular Music in the 1970s'. In *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure*, edited by Bart Moore-Gilbert. London; New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London; New York: Routledge, 1979.
- Hoskyns, Barney. *Glam!: Bowie, Bolan and the Glitter Rock Revolution*. London: Faber & Faber, 1998.
- Hunt, Kevin J. 'The Eyes of David Bowie'. In *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, edited by Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond. New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Hunt, Leon. *British Low Culture: From Safari Suits to Sexploitation*. London; New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Jenks, Chris. *Transgression*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Kent, Nick. *Apathy for the Devil*. Faber & Faber, 2011.
- Kolker, Robert Phillip. *The Altering Eye: Contemporary International Cinema*. Open Book Publishers, 2009.
- Lenig, Stuart. *The Twisted Tale of Glam Rock*. Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2010.
- Lupro, Michael Mooradian. 'Keeping Space Fantastic: The Transformative Journey of Major Tom'. In *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, edited by Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond. New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Miles, Barry. *Bowie In His Own Words*. London: W.H. Allen, 1982.
- Moore-Gilbert, Bart. *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure*. London; New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Morson, Gary Saul, and Caryl Emerson. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990.
- Moylan, Tom. *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*. New York: Methuen, 1986.
- Muggleton, David. *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style*. Oxford; New York: Berg, 2000.
- Newland, Paul. *Don't Look Now: British Cinema in the 1970s*. Bristol; Chicago: Intellect Ltd, 2010.
- Peeren, Esther. *Intersubjectivities and Popular Culture: Bakhtin and Beyond*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.
- Pegg, Nicholas. *The Complete David Bowie*. Richmond: Reynolds & Hearn, 2002.
- Redmond, Sean. 'The Whiteness of David Bowie'. In *Enchanting David Bowie: Space/Time/Body/Memory*, edited by Toija Cinque, Christopher Moore, and Sean Redmond. New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- Sandbrook, Dominic. *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain. 1970-1974*. Penguin, 2011.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 'Introduction: Axiomatic'. In *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.
- Shail, Robert. *Seventies British Cinema*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire England; New York: British Film Institute, 2008.
- Sontag, Susan. 'Notes on "Camp"'. In *Against Interpretation*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964.
- Sounes, Howard. *Seventies: The Sights, Sounds and Ideas of a Brilliant Decade*. London: Pocket Books, 2007.
- Stallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. 'Bourgeois Hysteria and the Carnavalesque'. In *Cultural Studies: A Critical Introduction*, edited by Simon During. London: Routledge, 2010.

- Stam, Robert. *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Stevenson, Nick. *David Bowie: Fame, Sound and Vision*. Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2006.
- Taylor, Ian, and David Wall. 'Beyond the Skinheads: Comments on the Emergence and Significance of the Glamrock Cult'. In *Working Class Youth Culture*, edited by Geoff Mungham and Geoffrey Pearson, 105–23. London; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976.
- Thompson, Dave. *Children of the Revolution: The Glam Rock Story, 1970-1975*. London: Cherry Red Books, 2000.
- Tikhanov, Galin. *The Master and the Slave: Lukacs, Bakhtin, and the Ideas of Their Time*. Oxford University Press, 2000.  
<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com.ezproxy.otago.ac.nz/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198187257.001.0001/acprof-9780198187257>.
- Totaro, Donato. 'May 1968 and After: Cinema in France and Beyond, Part 1 – Offscreen' 2, no. 2 (March 1998). [http://offscreen.com/view/may\\_1968](http://offscreen.com/view/may_1968).
- Turner, Alwyn W. *Crisis? What Crisis?: Britain in the 1970s*. PB Reissue edition. Aurum Press Ltd, 2013.
- Vice, Sue. *Introducing Bakhtin*. Manchester, UK; New York, NY: Manchester University Press, 1997.
- Victoria and Albert Museum. 'Touring Exhibition: David Bowie Is', 12 August 2013.  
<http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/touring-exhibition-david-bowie-is/>.
- Waldrep, Shelton. *Future Nostalgia: Performing David Bowie*. New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- . *The Aesthetics of Self-Invention: Oscar Wilde to David Bowie*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- Whannel, Garry. 'Boxed In: Television in the 1970s'. In *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure*, edited by Bart Moore-Gilbert. London; New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Wheen, Francis. *Strange Days Indeed: The Golden Age of Paranoia*. Fourth Estate, 2010.
- Zaplana, Esther. 'Breaking the Mold: Male Rock Performance, Glam, and the (Re-) Imagination of the Male Body in the 1960s and 1970s'. In *Embodying Masculinities: Towards a History of the Male Body in U.S. Culture*, edited by Josep M. Armengol. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013.

