

- ARTICLE -

Marc Bolan, David Bowie, and the Counter-Hegemonic Persona: 'Authenticity', Ephemeral Identities, and the 'Fantastical Other'

Alison Blair

Abstract

In the 1970s, glam rockstars Marc Bolan and David Bowie were among the first pop music artists to challenge norms of identity, authenticity, gender and sexuality. They presented audiences with a range of counter-hegemonic personae that enacted a departure from the conventional—the alien, the warlock, the 'bopping elf', occult magician and hybrid being. For Bolan and Bowie fans, these 'fantastical Others' represented an escape from the increasingly unpalatable social and economic conditions of everyday life in 1970s Britain—a period characterised by rising unemployment, declining consumer buoyancy, and ongoing industrial action—and, furthermore, they challenged ideas of essentialised identity and authenticity, by presenting personae that were deliberately artificial, ephemeral, and of fantastical, alternative realities. This article aims to contribute to debates on glam by framing the work of its two most pivotal artists—Bolan and Bowie—in terms of Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque.

Bolan, Bowie and the 1970s

Writing in 1998, the film director Todd Haynes noted that during his research for the film *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) there were no full-length books in print about glam rock, 'nothing to single it out as a comprehensive cultural phenomenon' (Hoskyns 1998, xi). 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. Given glam's relatively brief popularity, it might be tempting to view the genre's combination of glitter, glamour, showmanship and androgyny as an anomaly of sorts—an unexpected diversion—and leave it at that. However, no text 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. In the case of Britain in the 1970s, the cultural circumstances have been characterised as a time of social and economic crisis, informed also by an undercurrent of change. Both Newland (2010) and Shail (2008) in discussing British cinema of the 1970s, refer to the 'dystopian negativity' informing discussions of the period (Newland, 11). The 1970s were characterised by social change, hardship and fragmentation, and demands for change were articulated

Alison Blair is a Masters student in the Department of Media, Film and Communication at the University of Otago. Her dissertation considers glam rock via a Bakhtinian framework and is titled: 'Children of the Revolution: Bolan, Bowie and the Carnavalesque'.

across a wide range of cultural outputs. I would argue that we could include Bolan's and Bowie's work among these. Additionally, several relatively new popular books exist which document the events of the 1970s in Britain. As histories, they provide an excellent overview of key events. These works include Alwyn Turner's *Crisis? What Crisis?* (2013), Andy Beckett's *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (2010), Francis Wheen's *Strange Days Indeed: The Golden Age of Paranoia* (2010), and Dominic Sandbrook's *State of Emergency: The Way We Were, Britain 1970-1974* (2011). Taken together, it is clear that the popular histories of 1970s Britain focus heavily upon moments of social crisis, such as strikes, power cuts and unemployment. A sense of unrest and pessimism under the 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. At the beginning of the 1970s, the counter-culture's conservatism had also become apparent, not least in terms of its heteronormativity and androcentricity (Auslander 2006, 31). In terms of the music scene, Thompson, Hoskyns and Auslander concur that both music and fashion had become stale, stuck in a rut of serious inward gazing and drab denim outfits. The normative masculinity inherent in this, along with the hegemony of rock 'authenticity' in the music scene, are important here. Auslander discusses this, in regard to glam, and in particular to Bryan Ferry of Roxy Music (Auslander 2006, 150-192). Elsewhere, Auslander (1988, 3-4) also notes that the concept of authenticity in rock music works ideologically to constitute the romantic idea that rock performers are expressing their sincere, genuine selves. In the world of rock music, the notion of authenticity is a valued attribute of the apparently serious performer—it is an attribute that is, then, hegemonic in the sense that it is the dominant, agreed upon, most-valued attribute of rock music and its performers. I will discuss this in further detail in later sections of this article. Given this cultural context, and given Bolan's and Bowie's deliberate departure from these hegemonic ideals of authenticity, we can begin to discuss these artists as being counter-hegemonic in terms of their presentation of 'alternate personae'—directly challenging the notion of authenticity through the presentation of ephemeral identities, and through their self-framing as fantastical Others.

Cagle's 1995 study of 'glitter rock' is the first to begin considering glam rock as a radical genre. While Cagle's focus is upon Pop Art and American 'glitter' artists, he does begin to consider David Bowie in terms of visual style and the subcultural impact of glitter—and in doing this, he places glam on the radical side of Hebdige's (1991) subculture-mainstream dualism (61-62). Cagle's primary contribution to re-framing glam as radical or critical is his assertion that glitter—and Bowie—articulated 'a method for denouncing traditional notions of sexuality and gender' (223), exposing 'gaps in the heterosexual hegemony' (221). While Cagle concurs that the genre was a popular, commercial form, he also notes that it was at once a 'celebration and critique' (217) in that it

demonstrated ‘that to effectively transmit oppositional ideas, one had to be at the centre of popular culture’ (ibid). In this sense, Cagle argues, Bowie’s performance of androgynous, bisexual identities in fact challenged the system from within. His work is pivotal to my research in that it begins to explore the ideological tensions within the genre, thereby highlighting a much deeper hegemonic struggle. Additionally, Gregory (2002), several years after Cagle, approaches glam in terms of its ‘stylistic apparatus’ (39) and with regard to how the genre’s sense of visuality reflects glam’s engagement with issues around gender and sexuality. 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’ (35). Further, she poses the question as to whether the dress codes of glam rockers exposed a hegemonic ‘misogyny and homophobia’ (39) that existed in dominant culture in spite of 1960s sexual liberation. She notes that this increasing feminisation of men’s fashion not only challenged the 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 social issues and political developments of the 1970s—challenging or transgressing established norms. In Hebdige’s model, then, this sets up glam as a form of resistant style—and where my own work builds upon this, is to consider this resistance as part of a wider expression of the carnivalesque. That is, as a form of resistance through counter-hegemonic personae.

These ‘alternate’, counter-hegemonic personae, are linked with Bakhtin’s concepts of the social ‘safety valve’, and the idea of *masque*¹ as a form of escapism and resistance. Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World* explores the function of the medieval pre-Lenten carnival in regard to its counter-hegemonic response to official culture. The idea of the social safety valve being that, during oppressive times, the populace use the (officially sanctioned) carnival to let off steam, by adopting carnival masks – personae that challenge the dominant culture, institutions and power relations. Most pertinently for our discussion of Bolan and Bowie in context of 1970s Britain, Bakhtin notes that:

[T]hrough 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 (2009, 9).

Carnival provided temporary liberation from the hegemonic official culture: ‘it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions’ (10). It also marked the suspension of ‘conformity to one’s self’ (38) by carnival mask. For Bakhtin, this was of great importance, and in regards to Bolan and Bowie’s ever-metamorphosising stage personae, it is also of great importance to our 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' (40). It is carnival consciousness, Bakhtin argues, that paves the way for change (49)—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 (75). Similarly, the reversal or negation of hierarchical roles could only be expressed temporarily, in that carnival moment—but, says Bakhtin, the temporary nature of this suspension of hierarchies, boundaries and hegemonic rules and roles served to 'increase its fantastic nature and utopian radicalism' (89). Most significantly for my argument here, in terms of contemporary work on the carnivalesque, Gardiner (2000) posits that Bakhtin's utopian carnival space is not some means of totalitarian social organisation, nor is it necessarily future-oriented towards an idealised end-point. Rather, it is a critical, counter-hegemonic space—that is, an alternate reality encompassing 'transgressive potentialities' (30) that articulate resistance to prevailing societal and institutional conditions and power relations.

This is precisely my point regarding glam, and especially, regarding Bolan and Bowie. Given that the glam genre emerged and peaked during a period of Conservative government in Britain, and by extension the aforementioned social and economic conditions, my own argument is 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 at the end of the 1970s in the form of punk rock, the response inherent in glam was a form of escapism for audiences, imagining futuristic scenarios and incorporating characters drawn from science fiction (and in the case of Bolan, also hearkening back to a somewhat idyllic past). Both Bolan and Bowie presented the audience with their various personae or characters, the 'mask' taking the form of costuming, makeup, first- and third-person narration within the artists' song lyrics, and/or the titles of their albums—Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972) and Bolan's *Zinc Alloy and the Hidden Riders of Tomorrow—A Creamed Cage in August* (1974) being key examples. These physical expressions of personae—of identity—are an important aspect of the carnivalesque; and as such, we can argue that Bolan and Bowie's adoption of alternative personae are an expression of the carnival masque—a counter-hegemonic, subversive challenge to notions of 'authenticity', truth, and any sense of fixity in regards to the notion of 'identity'.

One function of carnival, according to Bakhtin—aside from that of 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's and Bowie's range of personae together constituted a counter-hegemonic challenge to

conventional notions of gender and sexuality—as, normative masculinity and heterosexuality, in a still relatively conservative Britain, were the hegemonic norm. This is evident in the popular cultural texts of the day. Television representations of homosexuality, for example, were either comedic (*Are You Being Served?* BBC 1972-1986), heteronormative (*Man About the House*, ITV 1973-1976), or non-existent. Even as late as 1979, *Minder's* (ITV 1979-1994) Arthur Daly warned main character Terry that time in jail could lead to some (presumably undesirable) homosexual behaviour. These representations of homosexuality served to contain its potential 'threat' to conservative, hegemonic norms. Bolan's, and particularly Bowie's, representations of gender and sexuality were uncomedic, and often eroticised. In other words, they presented something much more direct, and therefore threatening, to the status quo. Additionally, by drawing upon a diverse range of literary, musical and cultural sources in their stage performances, television appearances, style of dressing, lyrics, and music, Bolan and Bowie each presented audiences with a cohesive fantasy image. Bolan's utopian fantasy was a mystical and literary one, drawing inspiration from J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll, various forms of mythology, and science fiction, while Bowie presented himself as a serious-minded purveyor of futuristic and in many ways 'exotic' performance art. Both artists presented the audience with fantasy characters or personae that deliberately challenged conventional images of masculinity, and of the here and now of 1970s Britain.

The need for escape and for something new was, I would argue, born out of dissatisfaction with increasingly demoralising socio-cultural, economic and political conditions—the aforementioned industrial action, power cuts, increasing unemployment, and declining consumer buoyancy among them. There were also several developments that helped to clear the path for glam's arrival. While the dominant culture was a conservative one, there was an undercurrent of change of which, I would argue, glam was a part. In 1967, the Sexual Offences Act decriminalised homosexuality in Britain; in 1968, official censoring ceased for any production for the public stage (Thompson 2010, 20-21); and soon after Nicolas Roeg and Donald Cammell released *Performance* (1970)² – with its depiction of Mick Jagger's Turner, an androgynous, yet reclusive, rock star. These 'non-mainstream events' in British culture meant that there was a 'space' opening up where alternative, non-mainstream sexualities could be represented and/or expressed. During the 1970s, there was also the arrival of colour television (Thompson 26). This particular technological development opened up the visual possibilities for performers, of which glam took full advantage with its flamboyant and colourful visual styling. The weekly music chart show *Top of the Pops* (BBC1 and BBC2, 1964-2006), in particular, was of key importance for glam rock. Thompson notes of glam and its cultural context that:

[M]usically, Glam might well have been little more than an hysterical reaction to the 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 (22).

On all levels, then, there was a need for change, a need for escape, a need for *some kind* of revolution. This revolution in the music scene—a cultural uprising of sorts, was led by Marc Bolan and David Bowie, in a particularly carnivalesque way. In what follows I will discuss: the carnival masque, and identity and ‘authenticity’; the ways that Bolan and Bowie challenged the idea of authenticity through their ephemeral identities; Bolan and Bowie’s non-‘authentic’, non-everyday personae as ‘fantastical Others’; and how these identities of Otherness challenge the ideas of both authenticity and heteronormativity.

The Carnival Masque, Identity and ‘Authenticity’

For Bakhtin, the carnival mask is linked with the idea of the social safety valve. That is, by putting on a mask representing a character, carnival participants adopt personae that are radically different to their everyday selves. Through this, they transcend everyday reality and its power relations, and the ways in which those power relations are enacted. In relation to glam, we can draw a parallel between the putting on of the carnival mask, and Bolan’s and Bowie’s adoption of a range of personae. 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’ (Bakhtin 39). This could be thought to symbolise a rejection of conformity and celebration of difference. Bakhtin argues that the mask ‘rejects conformity to oneself’ (ibid), or, how identity is performed in public. By performing a persona in public that is different to one’s own, ‘authentic’ identity, one is not conforming to the *hegemony of authenticity*. 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’ (40). As such, the mask is transgressive, transformative, performative, and, in terms of its resistance to official culture, counter-hegemonic.

I will discuss Bolan and Bowie’s alternative personae as representing carnivalesque, counter-hegemonic challenges and I will elaborate on the notions of identity and ‘authenticity’, and the ways in which Bolan and Bowie play with ‘truth’ or the notion of ‘authentic identity’. I will also 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.

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’ (ibid). Auslander (2004)

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 (9). If we take the notion of ‘mask’ then, to include these arenas of performance, and if we include visual aspects such as clothing and cosmetics, along with physical gestures, mannerisms, and vocal affectations, then the mask, for our purposes, is highly nuanced, complex, and theatrical on many levels. By this, I mean that the mask is not simply the adopting of a name or a costume, but is also an ‘identity’ with its own ways of moving, speaking and (apparent) ‘thinking’. In terms of vocal affectation (or, the ways in which these artists use their voices in ways that are often highly stylised, as opposed to ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’), this is particularly relevant for not only Bolan and Bowie, but other glam artists such as Bryan Ferry of Roxy Music and Steve Harley of Cockney Rebel.³ Barthes’ (1977) concept of ‘the grain of the voice’ is pertinent here. That is, the voice, in music, is in ‘dual production’ (181) of linguistic communication and musical expression. In short, the way that a performer uses his or her 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. Before fully addressing these points, 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 not only progressive rock, but also blues-based rock, and counter-cultural folk rock. As Waldrep (2004) 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’ (106). The singer-songwriter, the blues-based rock band, progressive rock, or denim-clad folk-rock are all examples of this. The emphasis with these ‘authentic artists’ is on, as I mentioned earlier, the sincere expression of the artists’ true self, true feelings, and ‘unmanufactured-ness’ (this very idea, of course, is in itself a construction). 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 and bands 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 privilege’, as had the Beatles. These artists, apart from performing songs that expressed an ‘authentic self’, furthermore, *positioned themselves* as ‘themselves’—as the fixed, stable identities behind the ‘authentic’ music.

However, following Frith (1996) 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 (Auslander 2004, 4). For example, T. Rex's single *Jeepster* (1971) involves a main character who is a metaphorical jeepster (a road vehicle, with cars being a recurring motif in Bolan's songwriting) and also a vampire. 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, Bolan's *The Slider* (1972) 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 a primary point of departure from the aforementioned Woodstock and Glastonbury 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, with Bolan and Bowie regularly swapping one 'mask' or persona for another we can think of these ephemeral identities as a procession of masks that undermine any sense of fixed 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.

We need to consider Bolan's and Bowie's primary performance personae, and the way that each challenge the idea of 'authenticity', firstly through their adoption of stage names. While both artists are known 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 (Auslander 2004, 6) and Mark Feld (Stratton 2008, 203), who adopted their chosen 'stage names' of 'David Bowie' and 'Marc Bolan'. Upon adopting these performance personae, 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' (6-7). This is the first of several ways that Bolan and Bowie challenge the idea of authentic identity. Furthermore, as Auslander also points out 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 more so than they reflect the performer's 'authentic' personality (7). As such, I will draw upon resources such as press and television interviews in the latter part of this article, in order to demonstrate Bolan's and Bowie's performances in this area.

In addition to adopting a persona or a mask, 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' (Crowe 1976), 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. Further, he draws attention to—and privileges—the ‘inauthentic’ nature of pop music and the media industry (although as I have already mentioned, the dominant privileging of the authenticity in rock music is strictly speaking, also a construction). From presenting himself as the alien Ziggy Stardust, to representing himself as half-man, half-dog on the LP cover for *Diamond Dogs* (1974), 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 individual. I think he encompasses situations as well as being just a personality’ (Miles 1982, 33). This idea, of an identity—a mask—being a *situation* rather than a personality is a direct challenge to the idea of identity itself, and also, draws upon Bowie’s engagement with the avant-garde and existentialism. Waldrep notes that this increasingly radical ongoing metamorphosis alienated Bowie’s earlier middle-class audience (106). In this sense, we can consider his radicalism to have been particularly successful in that it challenged and disrupted 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’s and Bowie’s personae. The constant changing of personae, including the ‘killing off’ of identities, serves to trouble any coherent claims to an authentic identity. It may be argued that the death and rebirth of Bolan and Bowie through new, replacement, personae was simply a way to remain fashionable, current and marketable. However, through a Bakhtinian lens we might view it as a carnivalesque refusal to remain static—the constantly changing, ephemeral nature of their identities, being 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’ (256). 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. Bolan too, left behind one identity for another: switching 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. In his 1975 performances of ‘Dreamy Lady’ on television shows *Supersonic* and *Tiswas*, he also presented him as (a pre-Siouxsie Sioux) proto-goth.⁴

Moreover, Bolan and Bowie expressly challenged notions of authenticity in terms of how they presented themselves in the press—with, of course, the press no doubt playing a part in this construction as well. In interviews, Bowie deliberately shifted his ideological positions and sexual identit(ies), and Bolan told increasingly outlandish, fantastical stories. In 1975, Bowie stated that ‘the best thing that can happen is for an extreme right government to come’ (Miles, 124), and in 1976 that he believed ‘very strongly in fascism’

(ibid); yet in 1977 he claimed to be 'closer to communism' (126) and later that year, that he'd 'made two or three glib, theatrical observations on English society', and that 'the only thing I can now counter with is to state that [. . .] I'm apolitical' (ibid). In fact, he stated, he'd 'made things up' (127). 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. Bowie's shifting identification with homosexuality and bisexuality functioned in the same way—he claimed to be homosexual, and then bisexual (37-38) and confoundingly, that he had never had a bisexual experience in his life—'that [it] was just a lie' (40-41)—again, disrupting 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. For example, 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 this magician, during which, rituals were performed including the crucifixion of cats.⁵ Another fantastical story that Bolan told 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 would've been blood on the bed.' Bolan's wife, June Child, '[swore] she heard it breathing' (Thomas 1972, 34).

These claims, cannot even reasonably be expected to be 'authentic', at least in the sense that in everyday mundane reality, drawings do not come to life—and as such, they form a part of Bolan's self-positioning as a 'fantastical Other'. We could perhaps argue that this is 'authentically eccentric'—however, the very nature of the eccentricity is that it *opposes the 'authenticity'* of the rock artists and bands discussed earlier. The next section explores this idea of the 'fantastical Other' in more depth, particularly regarding 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 exploring further, in terms of how these personae represented a departure from everyday, 'authentic' reality. These particular incarnations of Bolan and Bowie represent a radical escapism from present-day (or, more correctly, British 1970s) reality, and again, directly challenge notions of authenticity—similar to both artists' outrageous 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. Bowie's alien

persona visually wears a bright orange coxcomb hairstyle, tight-fitting leotards and bodysuits, and androgynous makeup (I will discuss Bowie's androgynous alien persona further in terms of how he presents himself in two key videos from the 1970s). Bolan's self-positioning as magical elf and warlock is distinctly Tolkienesque, also representing an escape from everyday reality. His self-association with occult magick runs counter to the dominant, religious discourses of traditional Christian denominations. Visually, Bolan represents himself as a romantic 'bard' figure of the past, with long, flowing curly hair; and yet, he appears both elfin *and* 'space age' wearing a dab of metallic silver glitter on each cheekbone. Eyeliner, and sometimes lipstick and a feather boa, add yet another layer of androgyny to Bolan's satin suits. Both Bolan and Bowie's personae, then, are 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 (2003) argues, representing marginalised identities. In this case, this marginality operates as the expression of alternative, non-heteronormative sexualities.

'Otherness' as a Challenge to Authenticity and as 'Social Safety Valve'

We 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 (339).

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 presenting masque after masque. An early example of Bowie's play with alien identities can be seen in the single 'Space Oddity' (1969). 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 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 1973 album of the same name), and Bowie's casting in the film *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (Roeg 1976), build upon his radically distanced, 'alien' persona. Although *The Man Who Fell To Earth* is a pre-existing novel and film narrative not written by David Bowie, his casting in the role of the alien Thomas Jerome Newton is nevertheless one more example of 'Bowie as alien', both referring to and further solidifying this aspect of his persona.

A notable sequence in Bowie's 1972 video for 'John, I'm Only Dancing' is three different close-ups of Bowie in quick succession. Temporally disjunctive, they break up and denaturalise the action. Bowie is visible first facing the camera, then slightly turned to the left (faint smoke in the air above his shoulder to the right), and then turned further to the left, his face partially 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 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 later in the video. 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 the 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 and chiaroscuro-lit. He moves toward and then back from the camera in a play between seeming curiosity and receding back into the darkness. This is intercut at the very end with the 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 rockstar, and the curious but hesitant alien being—in both instances, distant, Other, and untouchable.

Bowie's 'Life On Mars?' (1973) video is also notable for the way it represents Bowie as a distant alien figure. What is primarily communicated in this video 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 clearly the focus of the shot.⁶ 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 clearly links him with the 'feminine' and the androgyne. The video's high level of visual artifice emphasises the artificiality and Otherness of his persona.

As the song progresses, there is a cut to a medium shot of Bowie. 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. 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 full 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. This is followed by 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, and if they are not of the everyday, then they represent an alternative way of being. In what follows, we will explore Marc Bolan's 'magickal', 'mystical' public persona as another alternative identity, and as an alternative to everyday reality.

Bolan, throughout the 1970s, positioned himself as having access to some sort of supernatural realm, involving wizards, dragons, Egyptian gods, past life recollections, and channeled musical energies—a realm far removed from the everyday realities of 1970s Britain. In 1970, performing on *Music in the Round*, he told television host Humphrey Burton that the words and imagery for his poetry book *The Warlock of Love* (1969) came from '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' (*T. Rex on TV* 2006). Channeling his poetry from another lifetime then, a time in the distant past and of an unfamiliar location, Bolan represents himself as Otherworldly, and non-aligned with the contemporary everyday. Similarly, 'esoteric magick' (as opposed to 'magic') and other such supernatural powers form a large part of Bolan's persona. Appearing on *Pop Quest*, host Steve Merike makes light comedy of this aspect of Bolan's image by referring to his supposed 'magickal' skills: 'He's threatened to do the

most outrageous things to me, so if you see anything disappearing, you'll know it's Marc' (ibid). Throughout press and television interviews of the period, Bolan increasingly represented himself in this supernatural light. In 1970, he described his method of songwriting as such:

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 (ibid).

The implication here is that not only does Bolan have his own special link with these ethereal 'magic mists', but also, rather than being the writer of his own music, the music is something that he channels from a supernatural, 'magic' source. Around the same period, Bolan also attributed his songwriting to both his guardian angel, and to Pan, the Greek god of music (Paytress 2002, 115).

In 1972, Bolan firmly consolidated his magickal, initiate persona in an interview with Michael Thomas in *Rolling Stone* magazine. Reading the article, we become very aware that Bolan's persona is 'not of this world'—he discusses ancient Egyptian gods, the planets, the learning of spells with a black magician, before proceeding to invoke the Egyptian occult deity Thoth—all in a manner which the interviewer describes as 'quivering' and expressed in 'harsh adenoidal murmurings and bloody screams' (Thomas 1972). Bolan states, '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' (ibid). He then proceeds to describe the alien-like appearance of 'Elphin creatures'—who he surmises might be from Venus—and asserts that they are 'very powerful scientific sorcerers. They're not around much anymore because they can't survive in this atmosphere' (34). What we are to make of this *Rolling Stone* interview is that Bolan is constructing himself as an initiate with a wealth of knowledge regarding magick and the secrets of the cosmos—an outlandish and clearly inauthentic cosmos that combines elements of sci fi, fantasy and folklore.

Bolan also expresses himself vocally to construct himself as a fantastical Other. This aspect of his carnival mask—what we might refer to as the 'grain of his voice', to paraphrase Barthes—involves an atypical form of enunciation that is distinct from modern English, veering into the animalistic: an aural reverse anthropomorphism, clearly separating Bolan from the everyday and from normative ways of being. Linguistically speaking, and in addition to Bolan's vocal stylings of yelps, whinneys and shrill vibrato, his lyrical content oftentimes involves the defamiliarisation of known words by placing them in unexpected relation to *other* known words, and also in relation to his own *invented* words. The effect of this renders the sung lines almost nonsensical. 'Salamanda Palaganda' from the album *Prophets, Seers and Sages, the Angels of the Ages* (Tyrannosaurus Rex 1968) is one such example. The salamander, with its attendant associations with alchemy and the occult, is the song's first link with the esoteric and the

otherworldly. Bolan's placement of the word 'Salamanda' alongside the nonsense word 'Palaganda', not only rhymes, but also conveys linguistic unconventionality.⁷ This unconventionality continues in the lines: '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'. The alliteration here also demonstrates that Bolan possesses a kind of linguistic 'prowess'. Following this, he slurs the repetitive sounds of the phrase 'Parisian z-z-z-z-zoo', and follows this with a high-pitched and bird-like 'too-wit-too-woo' sound. At the end of the song, he then repetitively vocalises the sound of a whinnying horse—the song's blue palamino, a fictional coloured variety of that breed. The esoteric, the non-normative and the anthropomorphic, then, combine to represent a persona and a world that is indisputably Other.

Otherness as a Challenge to Heteronormativity

As I have already mentioned, Bolan's and Bowie's Otherness is counter-hegemonic in terms of its challenge to norms of gender and sexuality. As McLeod suggests in his study of alien imagery in rock music, these Others offer an alternative, 'empowering' representation of previously marginalised sexualities—the 'alien' acts as a metaphor for these identities (338). 'Literal representations of resistance and metaphoric "difference" lie at the heart of many instances of space and/or alienation appropriation' (ibid), 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' (339). The alien itself is an expression of the carnivalesque, a cultural 'social safety valve' allowing for the imagining of *something else*—which, 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 while at the same time emphasising the 'alien', still relatively unspoken, nature of such practices in conservative society. As Jameson (2005) 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?' (118). Bowie's Ziggy Stardust implies all of this through the character's critique of conservative sexual values. It is the 'unknowability' of non-normative sexuality, laid out before us in its 'strangeness'—both the physical not-I, *and* the potential for radical otherness.

This link between alien imagery and alternative sexualities can also be seen in Bowie's 'John, I'm Only Dancing' video, which I will now revisit. The video 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 *noir* female. Chiaroscuro lighting is present throughout the clip, giving Bowie a *noir*-ish feminine mystique. His eye makeup consists of a single

stroke of black liquid eyeliner across the upper lid, suggesting the high glamour of 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 *noir*-ish glamour of a fur coat.

He first appears to the left of the screen, chiaroscuro lighting illuminating half the length of his body, while the rest of the screen is 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 play, 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 (still chiaroscuro-lit). He stares directly into the camera, hands on hips. His movements are restrained but remain 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 resembling 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—backlit in front of a paneled screen. The link between Bowie, aliens and eroticism is more than clear throughout these sequences.⁸ As the alien and the erotic merge, we are presented with a sexual Other—a sexuality that is, again, 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 fairground signage with the words: 'The World's Strangest Curiosities'. Collectively, these signs and symbols indicate the 'freak'—the 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', which forms a vampiric, dangerous sexuality—a counterpoint to Bolan's, at that time, 'teen idol' popularity. Sexuality, in this instance, is aligned with the monstrous—indeed, the carnival grotesque and the lower bodily stratum. That is, in the case of both Bolan's 'Jeepster' and Bowie's *Diamond Dogs*, the lower bodily stratum is aligned with the non-human creature, and thus, the Other.

‘Alien love will spark the future . . .’

During the 1970s, then, Bolan and Bowie both presented alternatives to dominant, hegemonic ways of being. As a time of change and transformation on one level, the 1970s in Britain were still yet predominantly ideologically conservative, particularly in regards to gender and sexuality—and this conservatism is clearly observable in the mainstream media texts of the time. David Bowie and Marc Bolan 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 channeling 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 magickal feats, then, these glam rockers’ own authenticity is not merely under question, but is deliberately, counter-hegemonically refused. Bowie’s presentation of an ‘alien’, ‘alternate sexuality’, and Bolan’s presentation of a sexuality that is somehow ‘monstrous’ and at odds with his positioning as a ‘teen idol’, is an area for further exploration. When viewed in relation to these artists’ overall sense of ‘alternativity’ to the mainstream, then the picture becomes increasingly complex, and as such, all the more promising for future scholarly work in the field of glam rock.

Notes

1. Translates into English as ‘mask’.
2. Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg, *Performance*, 1970. The significance of this film is that a central character of the storyline is Turner, an androgynous, reclusive London rock star played by Mick Jagger. The character’s libertine lifestyle, along with the film’s depiction of sex, bisexuality and nudity, along with themes of identity and performance, are pertinent in relation to the development of glam.
3. I expand on the nuances of Harley’s performance style in further scholarly work.
4. In these performances, Bolan appears with white face makeup, darkened eyeshadow and teased hair; his style is very similar to—but pre-dates—that of Siouxi Sioux, a self-proclaimed Bolan fan. Siouxi and the Banshees were formed in 1976.
5. 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 read some esoteric books.
6. 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.
7. 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.
8. 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* (1994, 198-215).

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