

FANTASTIKA JOURNAL

After Bowie: Apocalypse, Television and Worlds to Come

Andrew Tate

Volume 4 Issue 1 - *After Fantastika*

Stable URL: <https://fantastikajournal.com/volume-4-issue-1>

ISSN: 2514-8915

This issue is published by Fantastika Journal. Website registered in Edmonton, AB, Canada. All our articles are Open Access and free to access immediately from the date of publication. We do not charge our authors any fees for publication or processing, nor do we charge readers to download articles. Fantastika Journal operates under the Creative Commons Licence CC-BY-NC. This allows for the reproduction of articles for non-commercial uses, free of charge, only with the appropriate citation information. All rights belong to the author.

Please direct any publication queries to editors@fantastikajournal.com



www.fantastikajournal.com

AFTER BOWIE: APOCALYPSE, TELEVISION AND WORLDS TO COME

Andrew Tate

Let's start with an image or, more accurately, an image of images from a 1976 film. A character called Thomas Jerome Newton is surrounded by the dazzle and blaze of a bank of television screens. He looks vulnerable, overwhelmed and enigmatic. The moment is an oddly perfect metonym of its age, one that speaks uncannily of commercial confusion, artistic innovation and political inertia. The film is Nic Roeg's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* – an adaptation of Walter Tevis' 1963 novel – and the actor on screen is David Bowie, already celebrated for his multiple, mutable pop star identities in his first leading role in a motion picture. In an echo of what Nicholas Pegg has called "the ongoing sci-fi shtick that infuses his most celebrated characters" – including by this time, for example, Major Tom of "Space Oddity" (1969), rock star messiah Ziggy Stardust and the post-apocalyptic protagonists of "Drive-In Saturday" (1972) – he performs the role of an alien (Kindle edition, location 155).

Bowie's screen status is complicated by the fact of his extraordinary fame and influence as an inventive recording artist with a penchant for theatrical, visually distinctive performance. Julie Lobalzo Wright observes that although he was "never [...] a commercially viable cinematic star" Bowie "can be viewed as a successful crossover star in the cinema owing to three main areas associated with his music star image: visual transformation, emphasis on performance and his non-naturalistic, 'alien' image" (pp.230-231). In the four decades following *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Bowie appeared in many films that might belong to the complex set of genres associated with Fantastika. These roles often play on the aura of Bowie's perceived (and perhaps carefully constructed) other worldliness: for example, he played an angst-ridden vampire in *The Hunger* (1983), Jareth the Goblin King in *Labyrinth* (1986), and a missing FBI agent in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* (1993). In one of his final acting roles, he portrayed the inventor Nikola Tesla in the 2006 film adaptation of Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (1995). Bowie was also willing to mock aspects of his heavily mystified identity by appearing as heightened, alternative versions of himself in a number of films and television shows, including the comedies *Zoolander* (2001) and Ricky Gervais' *Extras* (2006). More recently, Bowie's musical and screen personae have been quoted in the performances of actors in mainstream Science Fiction cinema: Michael Sheen, for example, cites Ziggy Stardust as part of the inspiration for his role as Castor in *Tron: Legacy* (2010). Similarly, Michael Fassbender has said that his performance as the android David in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012) was partly modelled on Bowie's role as Newton in *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (*Huffington Post*).

Newton, in common with many of Bowie's protagonists since Major Tom, is lost, cut adrift from their home, a stranger in a strange land. The character has travelled to earth to try to save his own drought ravaged planet. He reshapes his body to assume a recognizably human form and, in

the film at least, he looks an awful lot like David Bowie in his mid-70s nervy pomp. This alien visitor uses his highly advanced scientific knowledge to become a wealthy businessman with the objective of returning to and saving his apparently dying home planet. However, Newton, in turn, is exploited, becomes corrupted by earthly excesses and his mission fails. The narrative, a rich study of alienation infused by Cold War anxiety, has inspired alternative readings that have interpreted it, for example, variously as a defamiliarizing Christian parable and, via Deleuze, as a critique of subjectivity.¹

Bowie's iteration of Tevis' character is beguiled by the power of small screen mass entertainment: "The strange thing about television is that it - doesn't *tell* you everything. It *shows* you everything about life on Earth, but the true mysteries remain." This statement interprets television as both revelatory and mystical, a medium that conceals as much as it discloses. Newton's fascination with the screen becomes an addiction; he loathes this seductive human technology but cannot resist its power. In an article on Bowie and film, Frances Morgan notes the disparity between the stranded, earthbound alien's anxiety about these relentless images ("Get out of my mind, all of you!") and the actor's own grasp of what our obsession with this mode of entertainment signifies: "Bowie knows – even if Newton doesn't – that the images are part of us and they're not going anywhere" ("Video On: The Cinema in David Bowie"). The film, and this moment specifically, connects with Bowie's fascination with technology, the future and the family of speculative genres including dystopian and post-apocalyptic romances that haunt his work.

This fear-fascination regarding popular entertainment and technology features on one of the lighter moments on *Station to Station* (1976), the first album that Bowie recorded after playing Newton. The character's displacement and estrangement bleeds into the off kilter, questing mysticism of the album and even the image of Bowie on sleeve is a still from the film. Indeed, the more sinister elements of Newton's character arc fed into Bowie's subsequent pop persona, the Thin White Duke. "TVC-15," a surreal and curiously upbeat number, a hallucinatory story about being swallowed by a television, is probably inspired by Newton's infatuation with the medium.² Of all of his back catalogue, this oddity of a song was the one he chose to open his four song set at Live Aid in 1985. The fundraising concert was broadcast to an estimated audience of 1.5 billion on television screens around the world.

*

In this editorial, I will explore Bowie's relationship with television, and address both the ways in which he responds to the medium of moving pictures and his legacy as a vital intertext in twenty-first century genre television.

Long before he recreated himself, for the first of many times, young David Jones, a child of post-war Britain, became part of the first generation to watch television. He was a fan, in particular, of Nigel Kneale's Bernard Quatermass stories, beginning with the *Quatermass Experiment* (1953), the BBC's first attempt at Science Fiction, screened a good decade before *Doctor Who*. For Simon Critchley, Bowie's early success is "connected to a latent, low-budget science-fiction exuberance,"

a sensibility that is “more *Quatermass and the Pit* than *Stark Trek*” and that became “a template for the ruined landscapes through which the spaceboys and girls of glam, punk and post-punk would run wearing outrageous, often homemade and slightly crappy outfits” (*On Bowie*, Kindle location 175).

A blend of alien mystery, technology and horror tropes bled into Bowie’s work from the late 1960s. The ‘Age of Bowie,’ to borrow the title of Paul Morley’s recent memoir, is also the age of television: he was shaped by this evolving, frequently maligned medium but he, in turn, has had a weird and lasting influence on its identities. Bowie’s emergence as an artist also coincided with the Cold War era Space Race and a renewed interest in travelling to the stars. Space travel gave Bowie a way of thinking about transcendence and immanence, belonging and isolation, community and individuality. Bowie’s work, since at least the release of “Space Oddity” in 1969, had displayed a fascination, an obsession even with interstellar travel, life beyond earth, with messianic Star Men who might deliver human beings from a cycle of violence and hatred that seemed to dominate the headlines in the early 1970s. Pegg reads the SF style of his early work as a reflection of existential anxiety: “the alien characters of his early songs merely exploited outer space as a metaphor for his own inner space” (location 163). Alongside this sense of alienation that he translated into an idiosyncratic, DIY SF vocabulary, is a similarly longstanding fascination with dystopian scenarios. In one sense, this anticipates the twenty-first-century turn to future fear, given the powerful sobriquet of the ‘new catastrophism’ by the late sociologist John Urry (*What is the Future*, 34). “Five Years,” for example, the opening song on *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972) is explicitly apocalyptic in observing a world defined by consumerism that is oblivious to its impending destruction. The scenario of incipient global destruction has become a commonplace of pop culture narrative but, significantly, Neil Cross, the writer of *Hard Sun* (2018) – an apocalyptic thriller made by the BBC and Hulu – specifically cites Bowie’s “exultant” and “life-affirming song about the end of days” as a defining influence on the show (*Entertainment Weekly*). This idiosyncratic vision of the end of the world has had a longer cultural legacy than its creator might have imagined in the early 1970s.

Although he was drawn to dystopian scenarios as a storytelling possibility, including an Orwellian influence on the 1984 inspired elements of *Diamond Dogs* (1974), Bowie’s work is frequently less bleak than the catastrophic futures that occupy much of our shared contemporary imagination. There are optimistic SF and, perhaps naively Nietzschean ideas on “Oh! You Pretty Things,” a song that appears on Bowie’s critical breakthrough album, *Hunky Dory* (1971). The lyric is a breezy take on new generational conflict and imagines the next phase in human evolution, *the homo superior*, that will connect with alien races to inherit the earth. The term *homo superior* – used previously in the *X-Men* comics – was also employed a couple of years later in science fiction show aimed at a teenage audience, *The Tomorrow People* (1973-1979). The titular characters were children and young adults whose incipient supernatural powers – telepathy, telekinesis, teleportation – marks them out as a new phase in human evolution. Nicholas Pegg notes that this is more than a coincidence: Bowie had met with the show’s creator, Roger Price, at Granada in 1971, where the two men exchanged ideas (location 7857).

Hunky Dory also features Bowie's most earthly of otherworldly songs. "Life on Mars?" is a song that brings together Bowie's fascination with space and his penchant for a gentle surrealism. Unlike "Space Oddity" or "Starman," released a year later, the song's narrative has very little to do with the idiom of SF, indeed the only real connection with the genre is the yearning titular question, returned to in the chorus. The song itself is saturated by adolescent suburban yearning and the power of moving images, even those that rely on cliché. Its narrator presents the world as a (sometimes disappointing) spectacle. The girl in the song is "hooked to the silver screen" but the film proves to be little more than "a saddening bore." The protagonist intuits that her own life has become a series of gestures, played out by others, undermining freedom or spontaneity. This might even connect with the well-known but remarkable origins of "Life On Mars?" Although Bowie is often seen as embodying individuality and originality in his pursuit of art, this particular song was a response, a rewriting of an earlier piece of music. In 1968 Bowie, a songwriter for hire, had pitched an English language version of "Comme D'Habitude," a French chanson, called "Even a Fool Learns to Love." It was rejected and, instead, rewritten by Paul Anka as "My Way." "Life on Mars?" is Bowie's own, later response. And, just as the lyrics address the escalating mediation of everyday life, so too is the song a kind of palimpsest. However, it also suggests the complexity of so-called postmodern pastiche: mimicry, adaptation, allusion, reworking and imitation do not necessarily undermine affect. Indeed, it would be hard to think of a more emotionally charged song, something that is perpetuated rather than diminished by its synthetic nature.

For a song by a very young man – Bowie was 24 when the song was recorded in 1971 – it is surprisingly full of ennui. Paul Morley links the song's powerful invocation of longing to Bowie's childhood move to the London suburbs: 'The question [. . .] was not really was there life on Mars, but was there life in places like Bromley, so distant from the centre of things it might as well be millions of miles in outer space' (*The Age of Bowie*, location 1257). This aspect of the song has a vivid afterlife in popular culture and, in particular, on television. In 2006, the BBC launched an intriguing drama series named *Life on Mars* (the interrogative of the original song was removed), created by Matthew Graham, Ashley Pharoah and Tony Jordan. This television adaptation is, in a sense, one of many cover versions of a classic Bowie song; one that mixes admiration and irreverence for the original by taking elements of the original and creating something new, much as Bowie often did in his own art. The show fuses a police procedural narrative with the SF or Fantasy trope of time travel: Sam Tyler, a detective in Greater Manchester Police, has a car accident in 2006 and wakes up in the same space in 1973. In a voice over, used as part of subsequent episodes opening titles, Sam reflects on the alternative explanations for his predicament: 'Am I mad, in a coma, or back in time? Whatever's happened, it's like I've landed on a different planet. Now, maybe if I can work out the reason, I can get home'.

The show plays as a kind of lovingly critical pastiche of 70s cop shows but with an alien visitor: 1990s Sam is as alien to his own past as Ziggy or Thomas Jerome Newton are to earth. The comedy and drama of the show depends on the friction between his contemporary ethics and the frequently bigoted worldview of his 1973 DI Gene Hunt; Hunt – who frequently refers to himself as the Jean Genie, another of Bowie's alter egos – is an example of hypermasculinity, a kind of id to

Tyler's ego. The show both exploits and critiques nostalgia – that longing for a lost home in the past. It also has an ambivalent relationship with the present which is represented as bureaucratic, dull and affectless. In a drama dominated by aggressive male egos, Bowie's challenge to 70s masculinity and gender constructs haunts the show. The narrative arc of the first season ultimately sees Sam encounter his childhood self and his own parents; the first series allows him to understand a trauma that he had never come to terms with (his father's criminal identity and the true reason that he left the family). It is apocalyptic in this sense of unveiling something that has been hidden; we might say that it attempted to disturb something repressed in British culture: a post-millennial world that saw itself as progressive, just, inclusive and emotionally evolved was haunted by Gene Hunt, a shadow self that the country recognised only too well. The fact that the version of 1973 that was created for the drama was highly synthetic and full of anachronisms that subtly and sometimes deliberately punctured its surface level realism was part of the point: both Sam's experience and the viewers is of an highly televisual, mediated vision of the past, shaped by cop shows, music and popular narrative. It also asks questions about authenticity and imitation; the masks that we wear in our public life and the subjectivities that we inhabit. These, in a sense, are very much the kind of questions with which Bowie wrestled throughout his creative life. He donned illusory, fantastical guises – Ziggy; Aladdin Sane; the Thin White Duke; characters on stage and screen – to think about reality. As Critchley notes, "[t]he truth content of Bowie's art is not compromised by its fakery. It is enabled by it" (location 199). Sam Tyler and Gene Hunt, iterations of different kinds of masculinity in crisis, were created by Tony Jordan, Matthew Graham and Ashley Pharoah but, even without the zigzag makeup, they might also belong to Bowie's gallery of personae.

Bowie's "Life On Mars?" is referenced in a less direct – but similarly powerful – way in *American Gods* (2017). The narrative imagines a battle in the contemporary US between the old gods, including a version of Odin known as Mr Wednesday, played as a con man by Ian McShane, and the new gods of technology and globalisation. Gillian Anderson plays Media in the show's first season, a god who appears in various celebrity guises (Lucy Ricardo aka Lucille Ball; Marilyn Monroe; Judy Garland) including, very vividly, as Bowie in a replication of the "Life on Mars" suit. Like Bowie, she is represented as a chameleon, one who responds to a shifting landscape.

Twenty-first century television might be regarded as a kind of idol, an alternative to religion, but in key instances it examines displaced spirituality, including traditional ideas of eschatology and less focused forms of religious yearning. The post-secular exploration of spirituality in *American Gods* is also vital to Matthew Graham and Ashley Pharoah's sequel to *Life on Mars*. *Ashes to Ashes* (2008-2010) features another traumatised, time travelling detective. Alex Drake, a police psychologist who had worked with Sam Tyler and heard his stories of 1973, is shot in the line of duty and wakes up in 1980. She encounters Gene Hunt and his team, relocated to London, and, like Sam before her tries to return home. *Ashes to Ashes*, set in 1981-1983, continued to push the psychological elements of *Life on Mars* but also ultimately had a more explicitly theological and spiritual dimension. The sequel heightened the overall narrative's focus on mortality, the value of life itself and the pervasive nature of grief. The title borrows the name of Bowie's 1980 (number 1) single – itself an allusion to the Christian rite of burial – and cites the song's apocalyptic imagery. A version of the Pierrot clown

that Bowie plays in its striking video haunts Drake throughout the first series as a kind of angel of death but also as a clue to understanding her past.

The pop theology intensifies in its last season in which the world of Gene Hunt is revealed to be a kind of purgatory for dead police officers, particularly those with unresolved problems. The final episode, playing out as a battle between light and dark, is both Miltonic and Bowiesque. Tanja Stark argues that the artist's "work has always had overt and cryptic markers of a spiritual seeker, his grappling with the Numinous manifesting in riddlesome twists across half a century" ("Crashing Out With Sylvian" 97). Bowie was fascinated by religion throughout his life; he was often, like many of his peers, hostile to its institutional forms but his work also engaged with prayer, God, the power of belief in a variety of forms. He also, surprisingly and spontaneously, fell to his knees and recited the Lord's Prayer at the Freddie Mercury Tribute concert in 1992. It was an odd gesture – televisual, perhaps; to some blasphemous, to others, worryingly conservative. Yet, significantly, it was a typical blurring of boundaries, an image that questioned the line between the sacred and the profane. It was, in a peculiar sense, a moment of apocalyptic television in which a cultural icon seemed to both hide and reveal himself.

Late in life, Bowie returned to the figure of Thomas Jerome Newton, his lonely alien, longing for home, still transfixed by television screens. *Lazarus* (2015), alongside the album *Blackstar* (2016), was the artist's final shared vision. Bowie wrote the music and lyrics for this stage show, part re-writing and part sequel to *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, with a book written by Enda Walsh. Newton, played in this version by Michael C. Hall, languishes in isolated splendour in his apartment, haunted by disturbing visions of two worlds in crisis. He also sings a number of very famous songs by David Bowie. The title, and the opening song, is an allusion to the friend of Jesus who, in the Gospel of John, dies and is raised to life (John 11. 1-44). Bowie's song and the show are both marked by spiritual longing and uncertainty.

Bowie's work plays with apocalypse in a double sense. It is fascinated by the secondary sense of cosmic destruction, of eschatological end and beginning; but also with *apocalypsis* as revelation, unveiling. He often remained silent, ambiguous and cryptic but this demanded further interpretation, further apocalyptic unveiling by his listeners, spectators and readers. Apocalypse is partly about survival, life after loss and grief. Bowie's work, from "Space Oddity" to *Lazarus*, wrestles with the spectre of death but seems to find hope and joy as well as melancholia in the absurdity of life itself. It is easy to sentimentalise and idolise creators, especially when they die. Yet Bowie, like many traditional seers, viewed the present through the lens of an anticipated future: he was oriented towards a time to come, an artist who wanted to think about the next day rather than yearning for a lost golden age.

NOTES

1. See Dene October, "The (becoming-wo) Man Who Fell to Earth," in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane and Martin J. Power, Routledge, 2015, pp. 245-262; Gerard Loughlin, "The Man Who Fell To Earth" in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Blackwell, 2001, pp.24-47.
2. For a detailed discussion of the song and its origins, see Pegg, location 11248 ff.

WORKS CITED

- Critchley, Simon. *On Bowie*. Serpents Tail, 2016, Kindle edition.
- Gilbey, Ryan. "Ziggy Stardust and a new take on Tron." *The Guardian*, 25 July 2010, <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/jul/25/michael-sheen-tron-david-bowie>>, accessed 28 June 2020.
- Loughlin, Gerard. "The Man Who Fell To Earth." *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*. Blackwell, 2001, pp. 24-47.
- "Michael Fassbender Inspired For 'Prometheus' By David Bowie, Greg Louganis." *Huffington Post*, 10 April 2012, <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/04/10/michael-fassbender-prometheus-david-bowie-greg-louganis_n_1415402.html>, accessed 29 June 2020.
- Morgan, Frances. "Video On: The Cinema in David Bowie," *Sight and Sound*, 17 January 2017, <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/obituaries/video-on-david-bowie>>, accessed 3 July 2018.
- Morley, Paul. *The Age of Bowie*. Simon & Schuster, 2016, Kindle edition.
- "Neil Cross reveals how a David Bowie song inspired Hulu's Hard Sun," *Entertainment Weekly*, 7 March 2018, <<https://ew.com/tv/2018/03/07/hard-sun-inspirations-neil-cross/>>, accessed 29 June 2020.
- Pegg, Nicholas. *The Complete David Bowie*. Titan Books, 2016.
- Stark, Tanja. "Crashing Out With Sylvian: David Bowie, Carly Jung and the Unconscious." *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane and Martin J. Power. Routledge, 2015, pp. 82-110.
- Urry, John. *What Is The Future?* Polity, 2016.
- Wright, Julie Lobalazo. "David Bowie: The Extraordinary Rock Star as Film Star," in *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives*, edited by Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane and Martin J. Power. Routledge, 2015, pp. 230-44.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the editorial team at Fantastika for inviting me to speak at the 2018 conference and to submit this piece to the journal. I'm also indebted to Brian Baker, Arthur Bradley and Pete Redrup for many years of conversations about Bowie.

BIONOTE

Andrew Tate is Reader in Literature, Religion and Aesthetics at Lancaster University, UK, where he teaches British and American writing. He has published widely in the field of literature, theology and theory. His books include *Contemporary Fiction and Christianity* (2008), *The New Atheist Novel*, co-authored with Arthur Bradley (2010) and *Apocalyptic Fiction* (2017). He also co-edited *Literature and the Bible: A Reader* with Jo Carruthers and Mark Knight (2014).