

SECRET THINKER SOMETIMES LISTENING ALOUD

Social Commitment in David Bowie's Lyrics*

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ABSTRACT • This article analyses David Bowie's lyrics emphasizing their social commitment and their concern for history's dispossessed. It first focuses on some songs from the album *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* (1980) and then moves to later songs from the 1980s and 1990s; finally, it looks back on Bowie's beginnings and the more narrative compositions of that period, where he was influenced by working-class writers such as Alan Sillitoe and Keith Waterhouse. This aspect of Bowie's output is often neglected by scholars, unlike his iconic stature as a gender-bender and the postmodern, fragmentary quality of his lyrics revolving on inauthenticity. I here argue that in some cases his social commitment, far from clashing with his postmodern style, exemplifies how constructedness can work as an instrument of political criticism. With regard to this, the present article makes use of Maurizio Ferraris's category of New Realism and its criticism of the reactionary parable followed by postmodern paradigms, reflected in Bowie's earlier references to the emancipating power of 'play' and in his later criticism of the post-ideological numbing use of irony.

KEYWORDS • Bowie, Music, Realism, Postmodernism, Sillitoe, Waterhouse

*Taking away all the theatrics, all the costuming,
and all the outer layers of what it is, I'm a writer.
That's what I do: I write.*
(from Des Shaw, *David Bowie: Verbatim*)

Those who are not familiar with Bowie's oeuvre may have felt some irritation, or maybe perplexity, at the number of his facets that were publicly recalled in the wake of his death in January 2016. As Francesco Adinolfi (8) wrote, there is no such thing as one Bowie, and everyone has his/her own Bowie to mourn. Not by chance did the acclaimed 2013 exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, still currently touring the world, carry the open-ended title *David Bowie Is*.

One world-famous Bowie is obviously the champion of gender-bending, the artist who, between the end of the 60s and the beginning of the 70s, staged a new freedom against public morality and its stifling norms, mixing gender and sexual identities, flaunting his masks against middle England's repressive atmosphere. (Martino 2016: 7) Novelist Hanif Kureishi, for example, remembers the song "Rebel Rebel" (1974) as an inspiration for him to leave south London's dull suburban respectability.¹ Philosopher Simon Critchley describes the impact of "Rock'n'Roll Suicide" (1972), where the shout "You're not alone!" becomes the emotional

* Many thanks to my longtime fellow Bowians: Roberto Mosca, Marco Ponti and Luca Scarpa.

¹ On the suburban landscape of his origins, see Marsh 27-28.

detonator for a whole generation of youth uneasy with themselves and with the world, pushing them to attempt to turn into something else, “something freer, more queer, more honest, more open, and more exciting.” (Critchley 17) Often invested with an iconic nature, this Bowie is widely known and discussed, sometimes sidelining his literary-textual aspects.²

Another widely discussed feature has to do with his postmodern attitude, often identified with his debunking of all pretence to authenticity and with his self-conscious constructedness: “Art’s filthy lesson is inauthenticity all the way down, a series of repetitions and reenactments: fakes that strip away the illusion of reality in which we live and confront us with the reality of illusion.” (Critchley 26) These reenactments are often embodied in the composite intertextuality of Bowie’s lyrics and musical influences, revelling in multiplicity and fragmentation.³

This article is centred on a textual analysis of some of Bowie’s lyrics. It espouses the idea of the literariness of the song genre,⁴ at times presenting music and literature as two discursive practices engaged in a fruitful dialogue that offers something more than a mere sum of the two arts (Martino 2015, 8, 15-16). I focus on the political side of Bowie’s output, and more specifically on his keen eye for the wretched of the earth – in other words, for the many categories composing history’s underdogs⁵: refugees, civilian casualties of war and marginalised war veterans, exploited labourers, the underprivileged in neoliberal economies, colonized peoples, and children.

I argue that his political orientation and the abovementioned postmodernist stance do not necessarily contradict each other. Rather, they are to be seen as the two sides of the same coin – i.e. of Bowie’s gift for reverberating the cultural climate of his time while more latently elaborating ways of going against its grain.⁶ One illuminating example of this is to be found in Nicholas Roeg’s film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976), where the alien Thomas Newton/Bowie is shown wasting his time watching dozens of amassed TV sets which simultaneously broadcast different channels. Christopher Frayling finds this “a key image of that ‘culture of quotations’ (...) breadth rather than depth; moving horizontally through information; life in inverted commas; no more grand narratives.” (Frayling *et al* 285) Nevertheless, this also implies a criticism of that cultural moment: Francesco Donadio (325) rightly sees that image (and its related song “TVC15”, 1976) as a metaphor for the alienation of contemporary man.

My argument is that Bowie’s political drive constitutes a significant trait of his lyrics. More specifically, I focus on his denunciation of social ills and of lack of human rights, not least because I feel it has been neglected by scholarship on him. I am thinking mostly of the two publications that functioned as the ultimate official acknowledgements of his cultural status: Broackes and Marsh’s catalogue for the 2013 exhibition *David Bowie Is*, and Devereux, Dillane

² A case in point is represented by Luca Scarlini’s volume *Ziggy Stardust: La vera natura dei sogni* (2016), where an exclusive focus on Bowiesque images and fashion-related observations ignores the lyrics completely.

³ About the fascination he felt for mixture, he called it “probably one of the continuums through my music” and with reference to *Station to Station* (1976) he added: “Using the wrong pieces of information, putting them together, and finding a third piece of information. It’s a Burroughs thing. What our life has become in the 20th century: we live and assume our morals and stances from the fragmented pieces of information that we gleam from the media.” (Shaw)

⁴ I recently found it confirmed when I included the song “Lady Stardust” (1972) in my undergraduate course on gender literature and thus found myself supervising a very stimulating examination of its lyrics by a group of third-year BA students.

⁵ I will not engage here with the issue of mental disease and the social mechanisms reproducing it, another popular aspect of Bowie’s art (not least for biographical reasons).

⁶ “Secret thinker sometimes listening aloud”, the title of this article, is from his 1975 song “Win”.

and Power's collection *David Bowie: Critical Perspectives* (Routledge 2015). Richard Fitch (24) incarnates this general attitude when he peremptorily writes that Bowie "does not denounce, as is usually the case in punk and folk". The following pages show that this is true only to a very limited extent, and that he also employed the straightforwardly referential power of language to expose the injustice of the dark sides of our age. They demonstrate this by starting from the 1980 album *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*, presented as a catalyst for this aspect of Bowie's writing; then moving to some later, more commercial works, and finally going back to some of his early narrative songs inspired by post-war working-class fiction, where his political poetics may be seen in embryo.

Politically speaking, too, it would be misleading to say that there is *one* Bowie. Some 1975 interviews contain ambiguous statements on Nazism: they were later to be rectified, (very partially) justified by his then dangerous dependence on drugs, and also amplified by a photograph showing Bowie meeting a crowd of fans with a Roman salute. This is a delicate issue that is yet to be clarified,⁷ and into which even sophisticated critics such as Simon Critchley dare not venture too much. (137) In any case, it is certainly another contested point that has sidelined the main topic of this essay – Bowie as the singer of the margins.

With regard to this, the crucial passage is the 1980 album *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*, released at the end of a decade studded with memorable albums – from glam rock to the Berlin experiments⁸ – and historically marking the demise of utopian ideals. In "Ashes to Ashes" Bowie resuscitates Major Tom, the astronaut who had given him his first success thanks to the popular "Space Oddity" (1969), a song which apparently celebrates the moon landing but where Tom becomes strangely lost, floating in space. The lyrics of "Ashes to Ashes" may be seen as hinting at a descending parable ("high"/"low") analogous to the burnt ideals of the late 1970s (and their many victims): Major Tom has turned into a slave of heroin and of the hallucinatory monsters that it generates, haunting him in outer space:

I want an axe to break the ice,
I want to come down right now
Ashes to ashes, funk to funky
We know Major Tom's a junkie
Strung out in heaven's high
Hitting an all-time low

However, the reality to which Major Tom would like to return is a far cry from offering a liberating deliverance. *Scary Monsters* represents one of the highest points of socio-political critique in Bowie's lyrics, to the point of suggesting quasi-prophetic subtexts. Its opening song, "It's No Game (Part 1)", is rightly considered by Francesco Donadio (401) the most exciting inception of all Bowie's LPs:

Silhouettes and shadows
watch the revolution
No more free steps to heaven
and it's no game (...)
I am barred from the event
I really don't understand the situation (...)

⁷ On this issue, see Usher and Fremaux 63.

⁸ David Buckley (224-25) considers Bowie's Berlin period as having exerted a "liberalizing and humanizing" influence, and shaped "David Bowie the chronicler (...) if not straightforwardly politicized (...) more alert to the world" in his writing.

Documentaries on refugees
 Couples 'gainst the target (...)
 Draw the blinds on yesterday
 and it's all so much scarier
 Put a bullet in my brain
 and it makes all the papers
 So where's the moral?
 People have their fingers broken
 To be insulted by these fascists –
 it's so degrading
 And it's no game

While the reference to fascist violence might be seen as a reply to that mid-1970s polemic mentioned above, these lyrics seem to foreshadow the dark side of the 1980s and beyond: the refugee issue, the increasing number of civilian casualties of war and an atmosphere of terror exacerbated by a widespread oblivion regarding past ideals (“draw the blinds on yesterday” resonates with the double meaning of “blind[s]”). Not to mention the totalizing – but ultimately trivializing, morbid and scandal-mongering – gaze of the mass media, where individuals are overwhelmed by images and turned into helpless, unaware, “barred from the event” spectators.

It is important to *listen* to “It’s No Game (Part 1)”, not least because Bowie yells it at the top of his voice, shrilly, as if he were being tortured, alternating with a woman (the Japanese actress Michi Hirota) who declaims the same lyrics translated into Japanese “like a drunken Samurai soldier” (Waldrep 152). In one of his witty (and alliterative) turns of phrase, Critchley writes that “Bowie’s genius lies in the meticulous matching of mood with music through the medium of the voice” (37). I think we are also faced here with an example of what Chambers calls the affective economy of music (28), given the state of emotional – beneath the moral and ethical – indignation that this performance is likely to provoke. Bowie’s vocal spasms become particularly twisted when he utters the song’s title, “it’s no game”, as if to lament how the close of the 1970s and the end of ideologies lead to the appalling possibility of not taking anything seriously any longer, not even great global tragedies, so that everything loses its material presence in favour of the ephemeral. The song’s end is marked by an increasingly overwhelming dissonant guitar (alluding to the deafening omnipresence of the mass media?), stopping abruptly only when Bowie hoarsely screams “Shut up!”

In the face of all this, Donadio’s reading of this song surprisingly emphasizes a supposed attitude of disengagement. Like Fitch, he places emphasis on Bowie as unfit for the protest song genre (Donadio 293, 392), to the point of forgetting that part of Bowie’s work can *also* be read from a political perspective. His cursory analysis of “It’s No Game (Part 1)” is a case in point: in his view, we are faced with the *parody* of a protest song, where Bowie expresses a sense of futility towards composing songs about public events, from which he feels “barred”. Donadio seems to privilege a view of postmodernism in its most disengaged sense, limited to a self-referential intertextuality. As I have said, one of the main theoretical tenets supporting Critchley’s book is similarly based on Bowie’s inauthentic, self-conscious, constructed nature, breaking “the superficial link that seems to connect authenticity and truth” – and I think that the complex multi-vocal layers of “It’s No Game (Part 1)” perfectly fit this description. At the same time, Critchley envisions Bowie’s postmodern constructedness as an instrument of criticism, resonating within us while causing a dissonance that impinges on our view of reality:

Music resounds and calls us to dissent from the world, to experience a *dissensus comunis*, a sociability at odds with commonsense. Through the fakery and because of it, we feel a truth that leads us beyond ourselves, towards the imagination of some other way of being. (41)⁹

Moving from this idea of postmodern dissent, I read Bowie's lyrics not as a form of textuality hermetically sealed in itself, but founded on a direct contact with the world resulting from the referential power of language. In other words, I am following Robert Scholes's exhortation to "rescue the referent" in textual practice (85), whereas a dominant tendency among scholars seems to lie in emphasizing the meta-referentiality of Bowie's postmodernism. In the Italian context, this may be related to the recent debate about New Realism. In its theorizations, the philosopher Maurizio Ferraris describes postmodernism as trapped in a sort of short circuit, having moved from an emancipating drive against tradition to a negation of the real and its concomitant belief that everything is a construction. Among the tenets that he detects in this trend, he describes "ironization" (Ferraris 4-10) in terms that are reminiscent of what Bowie laments in "It's No Game": a distancing from statement, fact and norm in favour of the rise of the facetiousness and farce that dominate media populism (4-5).¹⁰ Beside this specific song, I see very little, if any, of the supposed ironic/parodic side of Bowie's postmodernism in many of the lyrics selected here. Before Ferraris, Terry Eagleton levelled a similar criticism at postmodernist irony; according to him (28), postmodernism "has brought low the intimidating austerity of high modernism with its playful, parodic, populist spirit, and in thus aping the commodity form has succeeded in reinforcing the rather more crippling austerities generated by the marketplace."

My reading of *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* as a political criticism of the neoliberal tendencies arising in the late 1970s/early 1980s (anticipating some aspects of current globalization) continues with the second song of the album, "Up the Hill Backwards":

The vacuum created
by the arrival of freedom
and the possibilities
it seems to offer.
It's got nothing to do with you,
if one can grasp it. (...)
A series of shocks –
sneakers fall apart.
Earth keeps on rolling –
witnesses falling. (...)
More idols than realities

Freedom in its most liberal sense seems at stake here, with its new opportunities but, above all, its zones of forced exclusion for those who cannot "grasp it". The "idols" more numerous than "realities", in this reading, are to be seen as another reference to the vulgarization operated by media culture. As for the lines in between, they may remind (again) the listener of the

⁹ With regard to this, Pippo Delbono (26-7) considers Bowie's extra-terrestrial persona as an antidote to the fearful standardization characterizing our contemporaneity.

¹⁰ In a literary aside analogous to the multi TV set scene from *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, Ferraris (45) makes reference to Jerzy Kosinski's novel *Being There* (1970), where the protagonist Chance tries to eliminate what stands before him by clicking on his remote control. In his view, both Chance and postmodernism both believe that considering reality as a construction is enough to make us immune to the attrition of the real.

victims of history (“witnesses falling”), or offer a prophetic hint at Naomi Klein’s ‘shock doctrine’ view of neoliberalism. But this is one of the many points in the later phase of Bowie’s output where his lyrics become ambiguous, poetic, suggestive rather than narrative: according to Critchley (144), they are “strongest when they are most oblique. We fill in the gaps with our imagination, with our longing.” I see this song as a lament for the fate of the victims of a new era. Not by chance, it is entirely sung by three voices in a sort of happy choir. Donadio rightly compares it to a nursery rhyme, but in its chorus (“Yea, yea, yea – up the hill backwards / It’ll be alright ooo-ooo”) he sees a streak of optimism, in accordance with his biographical reading of the song centred on Bowie’s divorce and new life ahead (405).¹¹ For my part, I see this chorus as gesturing at the 1980s prevailing mood of optimism, due to a widespread inability to see the future consequences of such progress (embodied in the unnatural movement described in the song’s title).¹²

The song that circularly closes *Scary Monsters*, “It’s No Game (Part 2)”, re-proposes the same initial song – almost. Socio-political criticism (and its prophetic hints, I would say) is further emphasized by adding another stanza on child labour, making the significance of the chorus and title (“It’s no game”) most disquieting:

Children ‘round the world
put camel shit on the walls
Making carpets on treadmills,
or garbage sorting
And it’s no game

“Part 2” is sung in a radically altered manner, in a slow, warm, melodious, crooner-like voice. Again, I differ from Donadio in my interpretation of it: he takes it biographically as a sign of a more mature Bowie launching himself towards the worldwide popularity to come (425), whereas I detect a discordance between Part 2 and Part 1 (and between this second way of singing and the content of both) that hints at how even Bowie’s most commercial songs may hide a more serious subtext. The director Lars von Trier caught this perfectly when, at the end of his film *Dogville* (2003) on the brutality of the American Dream, he closed his story with the massacre of the entire village followed by the start of the end credits: a sequence of pictures of social and human degradation to the musical accompaniment of Bowie’s “Young Americans” (1975). This song is characterized by a cheerful rhythm, and it is generally taken by the mainstream public as a celebration of American youth (Donadio 293). Its lyrics, though, confront the sterilizing standardization of individuals, who are led (as in “It’s No Game”) to ignore the significance of past events:

We live for just these twenty years,
do we have to die for the fifty more? (...)
Do you remember your President Nixon?
Do you remember the bills you have to pay,
or even yesterday?

¹¹ See also Pegg 253.

¹² Donadio does not altogether ignore Bowie’s political message. Some parts of his volume, for example, aptly examine the overt and covert references to Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (255, 262-4, 270-1, 278-82, 591) including the *Scary Monsters* song “Scream Like a Baby” (421-2) – even though the lyric “learning to be a part of soc-society” could be seen as, besides a stammering induced by shame, a consequence of coercive treatments or a reference to Orwell’s INGSOC.

I argue that this ambivalence between entertaining and critical aspects continues throughout the compositions following *Scary Monsters*, which turned Bowie into a worldwide, mainstream commercial phenomenon (thus disappointing many fans). Bowie constantly kept a keen and compassionate eye on what he defined, in his single “Under Pressure” (1981, with the band Queen), as “the terror of knowing what this world is about”, while “Love dares you to care for / the people in the streets / the people on the edge of the night.”¹³ I am referring to *Let’s Dance* (1983), thinking of the music video of the title song centred on the condition of contemporary Australian aborigines. Forgetting *Scary Monsters*, Nicholas Pegg writes in his encyclopedia (135) that this music video is the first substantial example of Bowie’s political engagement in the 1980s.

Continuing on the lyrics of this album, the (underrated) song “Ricochet” is pervaded by a sense of the utter disposability of human lives, evident in the image of the scythe and in words such as “forgotten”:

Like weeds on a rock face
 waiting for the scythe (...)
 These are the prisons, these are the crimes
 teaching life in a violent new way (...)
 Early, before the sun,
 they struggle off to the gates
 in their secret fearful places,
 they see their lives unraveling before them (...)
 But when they get home,
 damp-eyed and weary,
 they smile and crush their children
 to their heaving chests,
 making unfulfillable promises.
 For who can bear to be forgotten?

The people described here are characterized by fatigue (“struggle”, “damp-eyed”, “weary”, “heaving”), and are on the brink of a physical breakdown as a consequence of their labours. Deprived of agency (“unfulfillable promises”), their lives “unraveling before them” are based on violence and alienation. Most of these lines are recited by a metallic voice, reminiscent of an echoing tannoy and thus conveying feelings of oppressive standardization. In this bringing to the fore of the wretched of the earth there is a sense of what Iain Chambers (26-7) detects, in the power of some music, as the constitution of a narration alternative to the official discourse of modernity. Surprisingly, Waldrep (150) dismisses this song with the unexplained phrase “political posturing”.

Bowie was to return to these topics recurrently in the albums released after *Let’s Dance*. These, despite the quality of many of them, have been largely ignored by most writings commemorating his death.¹⁴ One negative exception to this general observation is *Never Let Me Down* (1987), a poorly inspired album opened by “Day-In Day-Out”, picturing a young woman leading a dispossessed life in an American ghetto; though perfectly convincing, its foundational idea of society being divided into the privileged (“stay in”) and those who cannot have access to resources (“fade out”) is ultimately marred by an excess of didacticism, as Donadio rightly states (453-4).¹⁵ Worth mentioning is the album *Tin Machine* (1989), where the song “I Can’t

¹³ Donadio considers this song a sort of sequel to “It’s No Game” (427).

¹⁴ On Bowie’s output in the 1980s, see Waldrep (passim).

¹⁵ See also Pegg 66.

Read” is concerned with cultural depression and deprivation, with its memorable line that sounds today like a manifesto of globalization: “Money goes to money heaven / Bodies go to body hell.”¹⁶ The same album includes a cover version of John Lennon’s “Working Class Hero” (1970), an anti-status-quo anthem sung by Bowie in a voice charged with rage¹⁷:

When they’ve tortured and scared you for twenty-odd years
 Then they expect you to pick a career
 When you can’t really function you’re so full of fear (...)
 Keep you doped with religion and sex and TV
 And you think you’re so clever and classless and free
 But you’re still fucking peasants as far as I can see (...)
 There’s room at the top they’re telling you still
 But first you must learn how to smile as you kill

On the other side from the excluded, competition and its entailing violence are what must be expected of those who want to “stay in”, alongside an induced numbing of critical faculties (“doped”) that prevents one from seriously considering what one is doing. Lennon’s “smile” is not too distant, after all, from Bowie’s idea of “game” mentioned above. The image of a whole community in discord with itself later returns in “Dead Man Walking” (1997), a song contaminated by drum’n’bass sounds with lyrics composed by means of a cut-and-paste method which characterizes the whole album *Earthling* (Pegg 68):

an alien nation in therapy
 sliding naked, anew
 like a bad-tempered child
 on the rain-slicked streets

The last point that I wish to discuss in this article is how Bowie’s attention to the margins is evident from his very beginnings, in some early songs where he was still developing his writing in less oblique, fragmentary and more ballad-like, Dylanesque narrative techniques. One example of this is the song “God Knows I’m Good” (1969), narrating a shoplifter’s desperation. More specifically, I focus here on two songs inspired by some of the post-war writers who brought to the fore the life of the British working class. “Little Bombardier” (1967) is a waltz centred on a war veteran who spends his days alone, hungry and aimless, sung in a melancholy tone intensified by a liquid consonance:

War made him a soldier,
 little Frankie Maire.
 Peace left him a loser,
 a little bombardier

The song was inspired by Alan Sillitoe’s short story “Uncle Ernest” (1959). A comparison of song and story shows where some details were maintained, slightly modified or radically altered by Bowie. In the concision of his lines, Bowie tends to make his protagonist less detailedly realistic and more simplified: if Sillitoe’s Ernest is an upholsterer, Bowie makes him even more utterly dispossessed: “unskilled hands that knew no trade”. On the other hand, Sillitoe craftily determines his character’s identity through metaphorical language connoting his

¹⁶ Donadio (467) shows appreciation for the song, but reads it as a mirror of Bowie’s creative crisis.

¹⁷ According to Pegg (269-70), this version has not been particularly appreciated.

war experiences, the café counter being covered by customers' hands "like a littered invasion beach extending between two headlands of tea-urns." (38) Bowie's lines

Frankie drank his money,
the little that he made.
Told his woes to no man,
friendless lonely days

develop a densely significant sentence from the short story: "drink jar after jar of beer, in a slow, prolonged and concentrated way that lonely men have" (37). The temporary turning point in the protagonist's life, his meeting with two children, is rendered by Bowie by borrowing many details from the story. In both works the protagonist spends all his money to help them, until two policemen intervene. Sillitoe narrates a long scene with a heated argument between the policemen and Ernest, where the police act "quickly and competently (...) still keeping hold of his wrists and pressing their fingers hard into them" (45). Bowie condenses and metaphorises this institutional violence in three lines intensified by three consecutive rhymes (the only instance of this in the song):

Leave them alone or we'll get sore
We've had blokes like you at the station before
The hand of authority said "no more"
to the little bombardier.

What Bowie does not include is related to Frankie/Ernest's agency. In Sillitoe, the policemen's words "Leave them alone" are taken up by Ernest in an act of loud defiance; albeit only momentarily, before being physically subdued, Ernest reacts against being usually "treated as if he were a ghost, as if he were not made of flesh and blood" (38):

I tell you they're friends of mine. I mean no harm. I look after them and give them presents just as I would daughters of my own. They're the only company I've got. In any case why shouldn't I look after them? Why should you take them away from me? Who do you think you are? Leave me alone. Leave me alone. (45)

Another evident difference between the two works concerns the children's characters. The writer hints at the elder girl consciously exploiting Ernest's blind generosity, her requests expressed "only in a particularly naïve, childish way, so that Ernest, in his oblivious contentment, did not notice it" (43). Bowie ignores this, but adds an element of play:

his life was fun
and his heart was full of joy.
Two young children had changed his aims,
he gave them toffees and played their games.

And when the policemen threaten the protagonist, Bowie makes them ask: "Why was he friends with the children / Were they just a game?" In the light of the present article, I consider this addition significant insofar as it represents an earlier connotation of "game" than the 1980 sense: more consonantly with its period, this playing is to be seen as carrying an emancipating urgency in the face of institutional constraints, similarly to the earlier phase of the postmodern mentioned above in relation to Ferraris. In his study on Bowie's use of allusions, Fitch (19) traces another connection with the artist's postmodern intertextuality and play: "Etymologically, allusion can be traced to the Latin *alludere*, which means 'to play with'. (...) the key to

understanding the attraction of Bowie's work for the intellectually and culturally curious lies in his playful manipulation of allusion."

In any case, compared to Sillitoe, Bowie idealizes childhood. A similar kind of nostalgic attitude is detectable in another 1967 song,¹⁸ "There Is a Happy Land", inspired by Keith Waterhouse's novel of the same title:

There is a happy land where only children live.
They don't have time to learn the ways
of you, sir, Mr. Grownup.
There's a special place in the rhubarb fields, underneath the leaves.
It's a secret place and adults aren't allowed there,
Mr. Grownup, go away sir.

As far as the circle of children is concerned, the song's atmosphere is definitely one of harmony, relating to the state of bliss associated to childhood since Romanticism.¹⁹ The two following stanzas are composed of a list of children's names and their favourite activities, whereas the alternating chorus introduces variants of adults spoiling their fun. Though occasionally marred by harmless mischievousness, the children's state verges on the utopian ("Tony climbed a tree and fell / trying hard to touch the sky"), which is in tune with the mood of the inception of the novel: "It was better than Christmas, the way we rolled off down the road, shouting and bawling and pretending to limp" (Waterhouse 5). A deeper comparison between the two works shows that the song's lyrics include some details from the novel: amongst others, the rhubarb fields which are part of the children's improvised playground, their hiding den, and their parents representing an obstacle to their fun (see, for example, 72-4). Like in the previous case, the element of 'play' constitutes a contrasting element against accepted social norms. Nevertheless, as the novel progresses, this atmosphere becomes sombre and less innocent, until its tragic ending. This is due to the children's ruthless bullying of one another (Bowie expunges childhood's cruelty as he does in "Little Bombardier") and, above all, to some occurrences of paedophile abuse. Having read the novel, one inevitably senses that the song's sentence "and adults aren't allowed there, Mr. Grownup, go away sir" might carry a disquieting subtext. It is doubtful whether Bowie had this shattering of the childhood dream in mind. On the one hand, the song closes with a meaningless, toddler-like singing which conveys a sense of innocent childishness; on the other hand, its final words ("You've had your chance / and now the doors are closed sir, / Mr. Grownup, go away sir") reverberate darkly with the following passage, set in the abuser's run-down house: "There was this closed door that we had never opened. I looked at it and my heart started thumping and I thought for a minute of this blinking Bluebeard story, where he had this locked room full of women's heads." (Waterhouse 141)

Whatever Bowie's intentions, this composition is certainly one of many songs where he identifies in children another category marginalised and repressed by mainstream norms (as in "Wild Eyed Boy from Freecloud", 1969). These songs may be seen as a prelude to the youth culture that Bowie would champion in his following works, as in "Changes" (1971):

And these children that you spit on,
as they try to change their worlds,
are immune to your consultations,
they're quite aware
of what they're going through

¹⁸ Donadio (29-41) sees this nostalgic mood in the whole 1967 *David Bowie* album.

¹⁹ With regard to this song, Pegg (238) makes reference to William Blake's poetry.

In Bowie's poetics, this link between children and the dispossessed is poignantly caught by Delbono when he comments on the lyrics of "Starman" (1972):

We play with our star roles, like children who dress like kings and queens and then find themselves covered in piss and shit. And those excrements make us re-assume our true human condition, and make us feel deeply equal to the last of the last refugees of the world. (Delbono 31-2; trans. mine)

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