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**BLACKSTAR
THEORY**

**THE LAST WORKS
OF DAVID BOWIE**

LEAH KARDOS

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Blackstar Theory

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Blackstar Theory

The Last Works of
David Bowie

Leah Kardos

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Written by David Bowie

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PREFACE

Blackstar Theory takes a close look at Bowie's ambitious last works: his surprise 'comeback' project *The Next Day* (2013), the off-Broadway musical *Lazarus* (2015) and the album that preceded the artist's death in 2016 by two days, ★ (pronounced *Blackstar*).

These final works were among the most commercially successful and critically lauded of Bowie's career. *The Next Day* debuted at number one in the UK Albums Chart, eventually topping charts in many countries, and was nominated for Mercury, Brit and Grammy awards. It was announced by one of his most successful singles, 'Where Are We Now?' (2013). Tickets to the New York Theatre Workshop's entire run of *Lazarus* (dir. Ivo van Hove) sold out in hours. That residency was followed in 2016 by a longer production run in London (in a theatre five times the size), also completely sold out, and has since travelled to Amsterdam (2019) in addition to being produced further afield internationally with different directors at the helm. ★ won Grammy awards in all five of the categories it was nominated for and won British Album of the Year at the Brit Awards (both 2017). Debuting at number one in the UK and the United States, it would eventually be certified Gold and Platinum in both territories. Bowie's return was dramatic, mysterious and brief. This time, his return was not signalled by a new haircut or look; the final version of Bowie's star persona was conspicuous by his approach. He said practically nothing to the media by way of announcement or explanation, which naturally fuelled public fascination. Yet for all his silent withholding there was also generosity and openness in the way Bowie shared aspects of his creative process (if not the details of his private life) during the period, presenting the performance persona as a shared construction, dropping hints and puzzling clues with the public (the lists of favourite books and interesting words, cryptic press releases), making seven new music videos (all embedded with

self-reference), putting out collected B-sides (*The Next Day Extra* 2013) and sharing homemade DIY projects – a music video ('Love Is Lost (Hello Steve Reich Mix by James Murphy for the DFA – Edit)', 2013) and a demo track ('Tis a Pity She Was a Whore', 2014). Nobody knew he was ill outside of his trusted circle. His death triggered a worldwide outpouring of grief not seen since the deaths of Elvis Presley, John Lennon and Diana, Princess of Wales. In a public statement made shortly after his passing, long-time friend and co-producer Tony Visconti confirmed that he 'knew for a year this was the way it would be', adding 'his death was no different from his life – a work of Art'.¹ If this work and its attendant sequence of events were indeed conceived as a grand exiting gesture, then surely David Bowie was the first star to attempt something so audacious with such precision and lucidity. Despite his now-iconic posthumous presence in popular culture, Bowie's creative uniqueness situates him more on the edge of mainstream music practices than the centre. The last works of Bowie's oeuvre enact a process of individuation for the Bowie meta-persona. The work tackles the biggest ideas: identity, creativity, chaos, transience and immortality. Its knotted themes entangle realities and fictions across space and time; a catalogue of sound, vision, music and myth spanning more than fifty years is subjected to the cut-up; we get to the end only to find signposts directing us back to the very start.

The last works each explore perspectives of identity, death and surrender in the context of the Bowie star image. The catalogue is already brimming with deathly scenes and subjects: dystopian visions, murders and suicides, fallout and natural disasters, the many characters made to suffer and die, if not by tragedy or hubris then by the hand of cruel Time who waits patiently in the wings. Whereas those past ruminations possessed something of a theatrical or solemn intellectual distance, these last works have an at-times messy emotionality, a 'nowness', a sense of chaos and imprecision,

¹ A statement published on Visconti's social media accounts on 11 January 2016, subsequently quoted in many news stories about Bowie's death (*The Times*, *NME*, *The Guardian*, January 2016): 'He always did what he wanted to do. And he wanted to do it his way and he wanted to do it the best way. His death was no different from his life – a work of Art.'

of thrilling wonder and scale. There's anger and outrage and longing and humour. For *Lazarus* and ★, whether by accident or design, Bowie's physical death is unavoidably written into the context. Death becomes part of the art – Bowie's finishing move.

Overview and structure

It is worthwhile from the outset to explain what this book is not attempting to do. It is not a biography.² Nor is it a full chronological account of the period, peeking into the behind the scenes, or a comprehensive rundown of collaborative song development, technical processes, chart performance data or associated trivia. It doesn't offer an extensive critique of the music or provide much of an account of my personal and thoughts and feelings as a fan. For anyone interested in chronology and critiques, I can recommend the comprehensive and highly detailed *Ashes to Ashes* by Chris O'Leary (2019) and Nicholas Pegg's latest revised edition of *The Complete David Bowie* (2016).

What this book does do is explore some of the interconnected webs of meaning that are observable in the work itself. By 'the work' I refer not only to the primary outputs of the period in question, but to the artistry embedded within that connects with Bowie's entire sphere of activity – his career history and the totality of his observable creative practice across time. Although *Blackstar Theory* deals with death as a subject, it is not the aim of the book to pry into the private world of David Jones. Details around the specifics of his cancer diagnosis, the realities of his treatment(s), or anything concerning any preceding health problems, are none of our business. The aim is to approach the realities of Bowie's mortality using the same terms as he used in commenting and wrestling with it through his work.

The book is organized into three parts, each focusing on one of the three main outputs during the period 2013 to 2016. My approach

² David Buckley's *Strange Fascination* (2012) and Paul Trynka's *Starman* (2011) are excellent biographies that I'm happy to recommend. Updated editions of both are reportedly on the way.

in building these sections is loosely informed by the concept of the three-part stage illusion from *The Prestige*, a novel by Christopher Priest (1995) that was adapted into a film by Christopher Nolan in 2006, in which Bowie played the role of Nikola Tesla. The structure follows (1) the setup/*The Next Day*, (2) the performance/*Lazarus* and (3) the ‘prestige’, or the effect/★. The book moves forward in chronological sequence, but it is not organized thematically, rather, the writing takes its cue from the swirling, associational logic of Bowie’s artistry. Meaningful networks and constellations of signification will accumulate, gather focus and force as the book progresses. Recurrent themes (and familiar names, places, years, people, moments) are drawn into orbit around Bowie’s late star image, a density of information pulling towards the event horizon of the blackstar.

Part 1: Last act establishes the relevant contexts of Bowie’s ‘late style’, which I argue can be traced in the outputs from 2002 to 2016, and the remystification of his star persona in the last three years of his career. We consider the ways that late stars can exist as living archives, how creativity can become complex and self-referential as late stars age, and how they maintain cultural relevance even as they deliberately detach from contemporary aesthetics and concerns. We look at *The Next Day* and find it preoccupied by darkness and haunted by Bowie’s previous works and myth, saturated with sonic and musical signification. Here we see the unveiling of Bowie’s final persona, a participatory construction that draws attention to his career-long explorations of identity and the inner selves. ‘Bowie’ becomes a performance that we can assemble for ourselves, an image that we project on to the blank white space.

Part 2: Per ardua ad astra (trans. ‘through difficulty to the stars’) considers Bowie’s lifelong aspiration to write and stage a musical theatre piece, which comes to pass just in time – he attended the premiere of *Lazarus* in December 2015, which became his last public appearance, a mere four weeks and six days before his death. The musical is conceived as a sequel-of-sorts to the 1976 British science-fiction film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, directed by Nicolas Roeg, adapted by Paul Mayersberg from the 1963 novel by Walter Tevis, in which Bowie played the lead role. This section explores Bowie’s connections to musical theatre, from his starting points in mime and his unfinished Ziggy Stardust stage show to the thwarted musical adaptation of George Orwell’s *Nineteen*

Eighty-Four and the introduction of music theatrics to his tours in 1974 (*Diamond Dogs*) and 1987 (*Glass Spider*). Themes of alienation, otherness and social corruption from *The Man Who Fell to Earth* are placed next to poet Emma Lazarus's ideation of America as 'Mother of Exiles', as well as connecting to the biblical story of Lazarus's miraculous revival and other recurring symbolic imagery within the catalogue.

Lazarus was co-written with playwright Enda Walsh and portrays the stranded, substance-addicted alien Thomas Jerome Newton in a contemporary setting, tormented by visions and unable to die. Its dreamscape narrative pivots on the emotional resonances of well-known songs and new compositions that play into and against audience expectations. *Lazarus's* tangle of self-reference blurs the lines between science fiction, persona-mythology and biography. We gain access to its interior world of archetypes and symbols with an approach informed by Jungian dream analysis adapted from John Izod's *Mind, Myth and the Screen* (2001).

In *Part 3: ★*, the final album's densely packed themes are explored: sci-fi and occult symbolism; lyrical, sonic and musical signatures sewing up narrative threads spanning across fifty years. We consider the existentialist's quest for wholeness; the merging and melting of worlds: art, literature, sound, science, spirituality, language, histories, futures, fact and fiction. We chart the features of ★'s musical terrain, Bowie's handling of 'chaos' as a creative force, birthing sensations and intensities, and consider the nature of improvisation, 'liveness', ensemble creativity and the idea of the improvising soloist (here, saxophonist Donny McCaslin) as emotional-expressive avatar.

★ references and ultimately redefines Bowie's system of star signification (the lexicon of celestial bodies – star men, shining stars, prettiest stars, bright failing stars, new killer stars, stars that never sleep, and so many more). Using foundational concepts from Richard Dyer's *Stars* ([1979] 1998), where the star is a constructed image that embodies specific ideologies and impossible tensions, and setting these ideas in dialogue against the notion of the self-realized, wholly unified *Übermensch*, we articulate the Blackstar Theory. The radical potential of [black]stardom is demonstrated in the rock star supernova that creates a singularity resulting in cultural iconicity. It is how a seriously ill man can create art that illuminates the immortal potential of all matter in the known universe.

Assemblage art and intentionality

Assemblage is a term used to refer to a mostly twentieth-century hybrid art movement that incorporated mixed media – often found and mass-produced objects – into painting and sculpture. A well-known example is Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) – a kinetic sculpture constructed from recognizable banal objects, arranged in such a way as to disrupt their function and suggest new physical possibilities, opening up new ways for us to see and understand the everyday mundanities of existence. A later, similarly notorious, example is Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998), a piece which blurs the lines between painting, sculpture, theatre and autobiography. The multidimensional aspect is not only present in the sculptural 3D nature of most assemblage art, it also highlights the relationships between objects and what they can represent and, in the case of Emin's example, between the assembled objects and the artist's story. This fourth dimension of creative connection between disparate elements is what lends assemblage its uniquely communicative, time-travelling, world-jumping potential, explained here by artist Betye Saar:

I am intrigued with combining the remnant of memories, fragments of relics and ordinary objects, with the components of technology. It's a way of delving into the past and reaching into the future simultaneously. The art itself becomes the bridge.

– Saar (*The Fragility of Smiles (of Strangers Lost at Sea)*, 1998)

Bowie's last works possess a similar sense of multi-dimensional connectedness, so it makes sense that a suitable method of musical analysis should also include the key aspects of assemblage in the frame, as we are observing musical and extramusical elements interacting – music and sound as text *and* context. Such an approach identifies the salient details revealed in the music, its locations, proximities and functions, making note of the creative connections these details afford the listener. These can be images, texts, musical elements, performance aspects, sounds and production choices and any other ideas that are suggestive or referential. What the music and lyrics suggest on the page and also how these ideas are

embodied and elaborated through performance and production. How they are altered and enhanced by their proximity to adjacent tracks, signatures and vernacular, literature, history, Bowie's life and death. Throughout *Blackstar Theory*, the music analysis will employ approaches generally in line with Eric Clarke's ecological approach to musical perception (*Ways of Listening: An Ecological Approach to the Perception of Musical Meaning* 2005); starting with the assumption that musical meaning exists as a matter of perception, it is the listener who constructs meaning in response to the experience of music. This seems to be in keeping with Bowie's own philosophy on the matter, which was spelled out most succinctly in the joint artists' statement for *1. Outside* (exhibited as part of the V&A's *David Bowie Is* touring archive, which ran from 2013 to 2018):

Taking the present philosophical line, we don't expect our audience to necessarily seek an explanation from ourselves. We assign that role to the listener and to culture. As both of these are in a state of permanent change there will be a constant 'drift' in interpretation. All art is unstable. Its meaning is not necessarily that implied by the author. There is no authoritative voice. There are only multiple readings.

– Bowie and Eno (1995)

This might feel like a philosophical alignment with Roland Barthes's *The Death of the Author* (1967), where the creator's original intention, and/or the conditions of its creation, should hold no influence over any given interpretation. However, it is impossible to separate Bowie from this work because the meta-persona becomes the performance, and the material of his artistry and public life, the chosen vocabulary. Therefore we must consider the intentional and necessarily 'directorial' agency of the assemblage artist: element set beside element, 'the many qualities and auras of isolated fragments [that] are compounded, fused or contradicted ... [into] a vast repertoire of expression' (Seitz 1961, 86). Similarly, we should regard the role of intuition and choice in Bowie's intentionally dispersive and distancing approaches such as the Burroughs/Gysin cut-up method. The material we are presented with is the sum of many creative choices; our range of potential readings is based on what is 'written' and 'shown' in addition to what is already 'known'.

For listeners at varying levels of familiarity with Bowie's style, the musical elements that balance expectation, recognition and surprise will yield different reactions and individual appraisals. We can consider Bowie's collected works as a kind of ecosystem of interconnected sounds and ideas, one that listeners participate in, react and adapt to in order to search for meaning. Listeners also bring their experience to the table – what they know from culture, the ability to discriminate between music styles, references and tropes, a level of awareness of Bowie's creative vernacular. The literacy that comes from being familiar with Bowie's back catalogue and the characters, stories, cultures and shared meanings that swirl around it. Across the last works, Bowie's post-structuralist performance of himself takes place across territories of fluid space-time. The persona construction eclipses reality, with David Jones retreating from view as the final mysterious star image ascends. Here, the analysis of the artistry at play shifts from musical evaluations and textual readings to a grander exploration, looking at 'the peculiar relations that art establishes between the living body, the forces of the universe and the creation of the future, the most abstract of questions, which, if they are abstract enough, may provide us with a new way of understanding the concrete and the lived' (Grosz [2008] 2020, 3).

There are many curious and fascinating details embedded within the rich imagery of Bowie's last works (especially ★) that I have not had room to write about in this book. Like many ★ hunters, I sat through multiple seasons of *Peaky Blinders*, dug around ancient alchemical texts and spent a lot of time squinting at the images and publication dates on the 'Villa of Ormen' Tumblr account. I replayed *Omikron: The Nomad Soul* to study its soundtrack for motifs and spent days scanning Hubble's deep field images looking for the specific constellation pictured in the ★ artwork. One of the primary pleasures of Bowie's last works is its exquisite, barely concealed complexity, promising rich rewards for those who want to explore it at a deeper level. No doubt there is more to be discovered. This book would be much longer, and far more bloated and frustrating to follow, had I tried to resolve every puzzling detail I encountered on this journey.

I'm certainly not insisting that my reading of the last works is definitive to the exclusion of others. Nor is it my intention to strip Bowie's art of its magic by subjecting it to the rigours of academic analysis: the last thing I want to achieve is the taming of every mystery, to ruin the fabric by unpicking every stitch. I am aware

that it is relatively rare to find a book about popular music that engages with music theory these days. And I know that even the idea of such a thing can set off panic alarms for certain readers who might fear being led slowly through a morass of jargon-choked text. Because I want to be accessible to as broad an audience as possible, my approach to music writing favours the use of common language over a highly specialized vocabulary; where this is unavoidable, I have included explainers in the footnotes. The notated examples are illustrative of musical features I am also describing with words, so notation literacy is not a prerequisite to understanding the contents of this book. The only aim is to demonstrate some of the beautiful networks contained in Bowie's last works by exploring what the music is, what it says and what it does. By examining these details that we can all see and hear, we can identify clusters and constellations of potential meanings that can enhance the pleasures of engaging with Bowie's music and artistry. For me, this has been a journey of discovering new ways of listening, seeing and feeling what music can be: a vivid sensation of the beauty, complexity and intensity of existence; a way to dream big for our selves, transcend limiting circumstances and penetrate the mysteries of the unknown.

PART ONE

Last act

1

Lateness

Lateness, late style and late-period work are terms associated with a concept originally articulated by twentieth-century theorist Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69), describing the characteristics of the work made by composers, writers and artists who are approaching the end of their lives. Adorno, who coined the term ‘late style’, explored the idea in a series of essays about Beethoven’s last works (1964, and the posthumously published *Essays on Music*, 2002). He found that the music held a disruptive ‘catastrophic’ essence that agitates against prevailing aesthetics and foreshadows something new; in the case of Beethoven, hinting towards the atonal modernism of Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. Adorno’s ideas about late style suggested that, as time runs out, the mortal limits of life create special conditions that can allow art to reach its fullest potentials.

This concept was further developed by Palestinian writer Edward Said (1935–2003) in his final publication *On Late Style* (2006), written while he himself was dying of leukaemia and published posthumously. Said considered the last works of a range of ‘great’ artists, not only composers (Beethoven, Richard Strauss, Bach) but also performers (Glenn Gould) and writers (Jean Genet, Thomas Mann), and uncovered the conflicts and complexities that distinguished these outputs in contrast to what was popular at the time, revealing them as forerunners of what was to come in each artist’s discipline. Both Adorno and Said point out that late-period work can often be characterized by a complex, contrary and questioning spirit, more agitated and restless than serene or reconciliatory, going against what one might expect from artists of advancing age.

There is also a sense in these writings that an awareness of diminishing time can lead an artist to shed any concerns about being liked or necessarily understood. This idea was echoed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003, 24), when she described the ‘senile sublime’ quality of the work of ‘old brilliant people, whether artists, scientists, or intellectuals where the bare outlines of a creative idiom seem to emerge from what had been the obscuring puppy fat of personableness, timeliness or ... coherent sense.’ A feeling that the difficult, knotty quality of late Shakespeare, Beethoven, the irascible final writings of an Alzheimer’s-suffering Iris Murdoch, somehow possess an uncanny brilliance, finally free of self-consciousness.

Yet lateness is a quality ascribed retrospectively, usually only to the oeuvres of ‘exceptional’, renowned individuals. More often than not an artist isn’t aware that their final work will indeed be their last, so the concept cannot be applied universally. Wrapped up with this idea is the post-mortem reappraisal of something that might have been missed and under-appreciated in its time; for example, it was only after Picasso’s death, when the rest of the art world had moved on from abstract expressionism, that art critics came to see his last works as prefiguring neo-expressionism. It is only after Bowie’s death that the mainstream music press rewrites its appraisals of those 1990s outputs that they once scoffed at.¹ The discovery and designation of ‘late greatness’ allow cultural commentators to engage in historical revisionism.

There is a danger that the romance surrounding these ideas of lateness and greatness taints our discourse with undue reverence, constructing fantasies that perpetuate cultural bias. ‘Genius’ is a descriptor that can be lazily applied to artistic works and creative processes. It blesses entire oeuvres with specialness and implies preternatural ability, erasing an individual’s hard-won achievements and the gradual refinement of one’s process by way of struggles, failures and breakthroughs. It is also worth noting that the retrospective labelling of the ‘great’ and ‘genius’ artists is determined by collective assumptions and biases, which can lead

¹ See *Rolling Stone*, *Uncut*, *The Observer/The Guardian* positively reviewing music they once eviscerated (Greene 2016a, Hughes 2019, Petridis 2020). Also see Jonathan Dean’s conciliatory *Sunday Times Magazine* cover story ‘He Fell to Earth: How David Bowie Dealt with a Decade of Obscurity’ (2020).

to a more grievous kind of erasure: history's 'greatest' and most venerated geniuses are overwhelmingly white and male. It is easy to say an artist is good and their work is special, especially when the artist is popularly loved. It is unhelpful if one of the reasons we cite something as being 'great art' is simply because the artist was at the end of their life and the piece was complex or 'difficult'.

Despite these tensions, and acknowledging the dangers of romanticizing art and the artistic process, identifying the material attributes of lateness within the catalogue of outputs from a long career remains a useful exercise. It need not predict the future trajectory of an art form; it can simply be the arrival at a state of artistic being. It might be marked by an apparent detachment from contemporary concerns with trends, scenes, peer groups, audiences or industries. We may observe shifts in the texture and syntax of a creative language – sounds and musical devices, lyrics, voices, images and references. The nature, quality and rhythm of late-life creativity could be influenced by tangible late-life circumstances such as citizenship, family, financial pressures, access to collaborators, technologies and ways of working, bouts of illness, periods of treatment and convalescence. For Bowie, lateness can be observed in his arrival at a stable and autonomous creative process; his compositional practices that consciously reach back into the past to connect it with the present, using his catalogue and star image as lexicon. Bowie's lateness is evident in the finessing of those details that complicate, encapsulate and complete the long-running themes of his oeuvre.

A taxonomy of Bowie's late style

Up until the end of the twentieth century, Bowie's pop career was characterized by frequent surface reinventions exploring different music styles, looks, lyrical perspectives and ways of working. He would restlessly seek creative reinvigoration through change and became known for this mercurial energy. Changes in the sound and style of Bowie's music were often (though not always) brought about by the arrival of new musical collaborators or producers, sometimes a radical geographical relocation (London, Switzerland, France, Germany, America), and were quite often announced with a new

look. Some of these reinventions took form around the construction of a new ‘Bowie’ persona – a character in costume associated with a specific album from which listeners could perceive the lyrics and ideas as being from that persona’s point of view (Ziggy Stardust, the Thin White Duke). Sometimes Bowie’s performance personas became linked to a time and place (Beckenham Arts Lab, Berlin) or associated with a particular manner of public engagement (blond, tanned, mainstream-ready in the early 1980s; paint-splattered art-polymath in the mid-1990s). Towards the very end of the twentieth century Bowie would change his costume one final time – seemingly retreating from the frontiers of the new and away from restless reinvention, he ‘made himself more ordinary than ever before’ (O’Leary 2019, 451), performing a public version of himself that seemed in closer alignment with the ‘real’ David Jones. Roughly coinciding with the new millennium and the birth of his daughter, Alexandria (Lexi), Bowie’s late style begins with his reunion with producer Tony Visconti, marking the start of the final period where we can observe his songwriting perspectives and compositional processes stabilizing into a consistent approach.

Tony Visconti and ISO

When Visconti reunited with Bowie for the 1998 one-off track ‘Safe’ (co-written by Reeves Gabrels for *The Rugrats Movie* (1998), of all things, and not released publicly until 2016), they hadn’t worked together in fifteen years. Before this, the last Visconti production credit had been on 1982’s soundtrack EP to Bertolt Brecht’s *Baal*, which accompanied a televised version of the play for the BBC and starred Bowie in the title role. *Baal* became Bowie’s final release of new material for RCA Records, freeing him from his unhappy contract with them; the following year he signed with EMI and released *Let’s Dance*, unceremoniously ditching Visconti in favour of hiring Chic guitar legend Nile Rodgers as his co-producer.

Up until that point, Visconti and Bowie had enjoyed a long-standing and successful creative relationship. Beginning back in the late 1960s with production and arrangement on early Bowie single ‘In the Heat of the Morning’/‘London Bye Ta Ta’ (1968) and producing his breakthrough second album *Space Oddity* in