

## **David Bowie - The Trans Who Fell to Earth: Cultural Regulation, Bowie and Gender Fluidity.**

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### **Abstract**

This article seeks to address and interrogate cultural regulation in the context of the complex gender identity of the late, great David Bowie as a figure who has persistently and obstinately operated outside societal norms. In the 70s, his emergence into British popular culture at such a specifically revolutionary moment in time, locates him within the circuit of culture in a unique way, where his very being is nuanced by the processes of representation, identity, production and consumption. Through placement of his diverse personae into their cultural and socio-political contexts, it is possible to understand the cultural forces being brought to bear upon his identity; as an artist; as a musician; as a performer and as a gender-bender. The concept of regulation as part of the circuit of culture is particularly pertinent and by viewing Bowie through this lens it is possible to not only demonstrate his significance as a central figure that influenced the notion of gender as fluid rather than fixed, but also to understand how the system of cultural regulation operates to question, contain and ultimately assimilate *all* transgression, so as to reassert order and stability.

Key words: David Bowie, Cultural Regulation, Gender, Masculinity, Postmodernism, Commodification.

### ***Introduction***

This article seeks to address and interrogate cultural regulation in the context of the complex gender identity of the late, great David Bowie as a figure who has persistently and obstinately operated outside societal norms. As Chapman states;

Alienation is a thematic cornerstone of David Bowie's work, an observation frequently made by critics.... As a central component of his performative palette, Bowie has frequently taken the position of an outsider, and in so doing he has provided something of a rallying call for those who may themselves feel alienated. (Chapman, 2015, 27)

(In)famous for his androgyny and his stalwart resistance to be defined by his biological sex, his sexuality or his gender, Bowie signifies a radical and liminal fissure, where meaning

becomes fluid and able to elide boundaries and restrictions. In the 70s, his emergence into British popular culture at such a specifically revolutionary moment in time, where society, coming out of a particularly conservative post-war period, saw ideological absolutes starting to be publicly questioned, locates him within the circuit of culture in a unique way, where his very being is nuanced by the processes of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation (Du Gay & Hall, 1997). As a child of the postmodern era, his sensibility encapsulated the very notion of a fragmented and shifting identity that was always on the threshold of 'becoming' and 'being'. As Nick Stevenson considers;

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David Bowie's own particular brand of 'becoming' simply suggests possibilities, not a 'real' point of departure or arrival...Bowie's music aims to demonstrate the extent to which culture and the self is an invention. Instead of the search for 'authenticity' that was so evident within the counter-culture, Bowie offers a more playful encounter with human becoming. Indeed...the question as to who 'I' might become is evident from this point to the present day. (Stevenson, 2006, 42)

Through examination of his diverse personae over the course of his career and by placing them in their cultural and socio-political contexts, it will be possible to understand the cultural forces being brought to bear upon his identity; as an artist; as a musician; as a performer and as a gender-bender. The concept of regulation as part of the circuit of culture is particularly pertinent in order to comprehend how our individual identity and performance are constantly under bombardment by the agents of capitalism and consumption, demanding we incessantly and restlessly change so as to consume, but in the 'correct' way, as required by the conventions of cultural regulation. As Baudrillard speculated in 1975, consumers are manipulated by powerful capitalist forces and the underlying ideology of capitalist society, with consumption being stimulated by advertising and mass-marketing, meaning that in order to continue the production-consumption cycle, consumers have to be convinced of the need to change so as to continue the simultaneous need for production. For Bowie this persistent reinvention was also a form of self-regulation, that he imposed on himself, to ensure he was always one step ahead of the regulatory forces of hegemony (most notable in the shift between personae, from Aladdin Sane to the Thin White Duke, anticipating a similar shift in masculinity in society); the very act of change a significant feat of resistance against authority. By placing Bowie within this framework, the relationship that ties gender identity, on a micro scale, as a process of change, to (cultural) regulation on a macro scale, that demands uniformity and order, can be revealed. Bowie's alleged subversiveness and ability

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to challenge the mechanisms of cultural regulation will be examined through his performances, which departed the restrictive realms of the socially acceptable via his gender transgression, to initially achieve cult status, only to be followed by mainstream mass audience approval. This development of Bowie's shift from outsider to cultural icon will be considered in terms of the containment of his subversiveness and gender transgression through the process of commodification and normalizing practices. By viewing Bowie through this lens it is the intention to not only demonstrate his significance as a central figure that influenced the notion of gender as fluid rather than fixed, but also to understand how the system of cultural regulation operates to question, contain and ultimately assimilate *all* transgression, so as to reassert order and stability.

### ***The Circuit of Culture; Regulation, Rebellion and Gender***

In order to contextualise Bowie's influence on gender and more specifically masculinity, over the span of his career, Du Gay and Hall's (1997) notion of cultural and social regulation, as part of the Circuit of Culture is a particularly relevant analytical approach. By considering Bowie's personae as cultural artefacts, much as Du Gay and Hall considered the Sony Walkman as a cultural artefact, it becomes possible to understand the mechanisms and underlying agenda of the capitalist, consumerist society that Ziggy and his descendants emerged into, and how his ambiguous interpretation of masculinity questioned and challenged that agenda. Not only does this approach help to comprehend how culture operates but also to understand Bowie's multiple identities and reinventions as those that simultaneously respond to, yet initiate a fundamental change in societal attitude and perspective. As Du Gay and Hall propose, through studying a cultural artefact's 'story' or 'biography' one can learn a great deal about the ways in which culture works' (1997, 2). A study of Bowie's 'biography' is intended to reveal how cultural regulation has been instrumental in shaping and controlling the notion of masculinity and gender, and the resulting impact on society.

Although there is more than one form of regulation in operation in and across both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as identified by Kenneth Thompson (1997), such as economic regulation, related to capitalist production and consumerism, and moral regulation related to moral behaviour and state formation (15-16), the most significant when considering Bowie and his impact on gender is the concept of cultural regulation as spoken of by Hall (1997, pp234-26). Cultural regulation in this case can be defined as 'regulation *by* culture'

rather than 'regulation of culture' (Hall, 1997, 233), which also relates to Foucault's ideas of the internalisation of external forces, where behaviour is modified by social conditioning (1975). Hall dubs this 'normative regulation' and explains;

What normative regulation does is to give human conduct and practice a shape, direction and purpose, to guide our physical actions in line with certain purposes, ends and intentions, to make our actions both intelligible to others, and predictable, regular, to create an orderly world – in which each action is inscribed by the meanings and values of a shared culture. (Hall, 1997, 234)

The power of shared values and the boundaries of 'who belongs' and who doesn't, is that those who don't conform, who are easily identified as not belonging, are quickly ostracised and placed 'outside the discursive and normative limits of our particular way of doing things' (Hall, 1997, 234). This is also identified by Hall as part of a classificatory system, which operates to set boundaries and limits and emphasise the differences between the acceptable and unacceptable in terms of 'our behaviour, our dress, our speech, our habits, what customs and practices are considered 'normal' or 'abnormal', who is 'clean' or 'unclean' (Hall, 1997, 234). This includes, the criteria of male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual, where these categories were clearly defined in the 60s and 70s, according to strict dress codes and standards of behaviour assigned according to biological sex. This system of criteria allows a culture to clearly identify someone whose behaviour is consistently unacceptable and regulated by a set of norms and values not shared by that culture (such as Bowies' early personae, Ziggy Stardust and Aladdin Sane). Once identified, our own behaviour towards that individual is modified, so that they are rejected from mainstream society in an attempt to reassert order and 'the meanings and values of a shared culture' (Hall, 1997, 234). As Hall states (1997, 234-235), 'Classifying actions and ascribing human conduct and practices within our systems of cultural classification, is another form of cultural regulation'. Hall also defines a third type of cultural regulation, whereby cultural pressure is brought to bear upon the 'subject' through a system of rewards for appropriate behaviour and penalties for inappropriate behaviour; where individuals will eventually, 'subjectively' regulate themselves. This can be seen in action mostly in institutions and workplaces, but is still relevant to the notion of 'regulation by culture', as a system that rules and controls by means of an internalised set of learned behaviours that the majority of society are loath to deny.

What these three types of cultural regulation have in common is the notion that the power they possess endures because of their ability to accommodate and incorporate change, in a process of assimilation. As Hall points out normative regulation will always and inevitably

break down, otherwise culture, human endeavour and creativity would repeat and stagnate. On the same token, classificatory regulation will shift in response to alterations in normative regulation, providing us with a new set of criteria to measure normality and shared values by. Subjective regulation is itself 'Regulation through the medium of 'culture change' – through a shift in the 'regime of meanings' and by the production of new subjectivities, within a new set of organisational disciplines'. (Hall, 1997, 235) All three are closely integrated, but operate at different cultural levels; normative regulation on an individual level; classificatory regulation on a societal level; and subjective regulation on an institutional level. However, all three are so closely bound to each other, a modification at the individual level will eventually produce a corresponding change at the institutional level.

In relation to Bowie, his career as an artist spans a period where this process of change in terms of cultural regulation is particularly pertinent because of the acceleration in response to the shift from modernity to postmodernity (Jameson, 1992). As an exemplar of reinvention and rebellion, Bowie's constantly transforming personae represent his struggle to stay ahead of the restrictions of cultural regulation, on all three levels as defined above. Normative regulation as imposed on Bowie (and other glam rock performers) in the 70s, was a complex negotiation between acceptance and imitation on behalf of the fans (usually part of youth culture), and condemnation and disapproval on behalf of the establishment. As Stevenson notes;

As most critics of identity politics fully recognize, even during times where human societies are expanding their cultural repertoires of identities they might seek to inhabit, powerful cultural norms continue to rule in and rule out different kinds of identity. There is then no identity that is not policed, checked over and sanctioned. If you like, since the sixties we are what we make ourselves, but we are so as a result of certain pressures and opportunities. The kinds of experimentation engaged in by stars, icons and celebrities can indeed lead to more expanded and open repertoires on the part of ordinary people. (Stevenson, 2006, 38-39)

Stevenson's point serves to illustrate how Bowie's identity/ies, particularly in the late 60s and early 70s, not only courageously pushed at the boundaries of cultural normality and acceptance, and were very much a part of the fundamental change occurring in society, but were also instrumental in widening the possibilities for multi-faceted and fragmented identities for everyone. This of course was part of the thrust of postmodernity emerging at this time, where, as Stuart Hall speculates,

The very process of identification, through which we project ourselves into our cultural identities, has become more open-ended, variable and

problematic. This produces the post-modern subject, conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a 'moveable feast': formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us... It is historically, not biologically, defined. The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'. (Hall, 1992, 277)

Hall thereby recognises identity as culturally constructed, and postmodern identity as an integral part of postmodern society that essentially expressed its essence. However it took individuals of a certain creative and rebellious sensibility, like Andy Warhol and Bowie, to implement its effective spread throughout society and culture.

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As the most memorable instigator of the Pop Art movement in the 60s, Warhol was recognised as a major avant-garde artist who not only changed the way art was perceived and created, with the notion of commercial reproduction, but also introduced consumer culture into the avant-garde. As Glick notes, Warhol himself declared, 'business art is the step that comes after Art. I started as a commercial artist, and I want to finish as a business artist' (Warhol quoted in, Glick, 2009, 135). His ability to connect and relate together the concept of consumerism, sexuality and identity in his art, correlates closely with Bowie's own preoccupation and intellectual engagement with these aspects in his various personae and music.

Bowie was a huge fan of Warhol and, as noted by Matt Wrbican in his blog for The Andy Warhol Museum, had in common their refusal to have just one identity, thereby encouraging 'those of us who live in the world differently (creatively or romantically), to strive for and achieve a bolder, more satisfying life'. (Wrbican, 2016). Both artists' work intersect with the radical desire for change in the 60s and 70s and offer an alternative vision of how to look, live and engage with a postmodern society. As Glick says of Warhol,

the "real interest" of his work lies in its rebellion against the oppositions of art/industry and erotics/economics. Warhol's "queer" desire to disobey and disregard the central oppositions of modern culture— itself a provocative critique of the imperatives of industrial capitalism— points to the radical possibilities embedded in the artist's way of looking. (Glick, 2006, 136)

Warhol and Bowie's ability to tap into popular culture and the public consciousness meant they were capable of identifying the desire for change apparent in youth culture in the 60s and 70s, and anticipate a relevant response that captured the public imagination. However, as Warhol himself critiqued in his art, the postmodern impulse also relied on the commodification of people as well as objects. Stevenson notes that,

What became apparent in Bowie's art in the seventies is the mutual interconnection between Pop Art and glam rock. Indeed, the influence of these two (at first very different) artistic and popular cultural formations that gave Bowie the tag of postmodern. (Stevenson, 2006, 47)

This link between the arts also extends to incorporate the elements of theatre and performance that Bowie displays throughout his career. Bowie's relationship with postmodernism is significant in terms of normative regulation, as the 'playful' nature associated with the concept allowed him the space to challenge the normalising images of masculinity. This challenge attacked the boundaries between male and female in a moment of rebellion that produced the androgynous yet sexualised figure of Ziggy Stardust (Stevenson, 2006). To relate this to capitalism and commodification it is necessary to understand his creations as 'packaged' personae that offered a neat and carefully constructed image that appealed to a younger sensibility while at the same time offering a challenge to the establishment.

Indeed both the cultures of teen pop and progressive rock are the result of marketing and commodification, the only difference being they are usually made with different audiences in mind...If we view the distinctive images and personas adopted by Bowie as central to his art, then it is perhaps easy to understand his interest in notions of change...Bowie's cultural inventions – including Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane and The Thin White Duke – are not so much direct expressions of his personality but commodified and arresting images designed to be displayed in the public arena. (Stevenson, 2006, 5)

Stevenson associates Bowie's personae with the notion of performativity and theatre, which also relate to Judith Butler's theories of gender as a performance, where the attributes of masculinity and femininity are identified as being ideological mechanisms that are assigned to biological sex by society, rather than being innate. Effectively Butler's theories recognise and incorporate the idea of normative regulation and attempt to disrupt the way this regulation operates through a thorough dissection of how and why it has historically succeeded in containing what Butler (1990) calls the 'fluidity' of gender as a free-floating aspect of identity, that should be assumed by choice rather than being culturally enforced. Butler's seminal text *Gender Trouble* (1990) emerged at a time when the concept of postmodernity had been well established in academic terms, and deeply entrenched in society itself, allowing Butler and other theorists who followed (Gauntlet, (2008) etc.) to consider the notion of fragmented and self-reflexive identity as one that was coincidental with the radical shift occurring in society since the 70s. Bowie as an artist, whose career developed over these crucial eras of radical change, represents a complex mediation between the concepts of

postmodernism, gender theory and performativity, capitalism and commodification and cultural regulation.

### ***Bowie, Postmodernism, Capitalism, Consumption and Normative Regulation***

As part of the glam rock movement, Bowie has typically been regarded as apolitical and any change implemented through the artists' influence as a side-effect rather than intentional.

This is highlighted by Feldman-Barrett & Bennett who state that;

while shifts in notions of sexuality and sexual politics have been attributed to glam and in particular, David Bowie at the time of its greatest reach in the early 1970s... glam has a distinctly apolitical feel. Indeed, most glam artists rarely commented on political issues and seemed more interested in talking about their music and the connection they felt with their audience. (2016, 396)

However, at the time Bowie was declaring his gay/bisexual identity in 1972, homosexuality had only recently in 1967 been legalised between consenting adults over 21, in private. The fact that the majority of the community still regarded homosexuality as a perversion that could not be practiced openly, actually presents his public 'coming-out' as a politically motivated act of rebellion that challenged heterosexual hegemony and could be seen as a bid to disrupt cultural norms in such a way that almost invited the forces of normative regulation to retaliate. The media is a particularly formidable disseminator of cultural regulation which was applied to Bowie through his comparison to orthodox images of masculinity as a critique of his image and his suitability as a role model. As Auslander quotes of Ian Chambers,

In everyday life, the cultural map of glam rock was destined to remain largely restricted to pop music's internal geography. Attempts to translate its imaginative gestures into the more rigid performances of daily cultures often encountered vindictive male outrage... To play with "masculinity" was still condemned to remain more an imaginary than a practical option for the majority of boys. (Auslander, 2006, 230)

The 'vindictive male outrage' identified by Chambers as a reaction to the alternative masculinity being presented by glam rock in general and Bowie specifically, is supported and even encouraged by the media, operating largely on behalf of mainstream culture and the establishment. This process is a part of both normative and classificatory regulation as specified by Hall (1997), where Bowie's challenge to the gender norms of masculinity was magnified and actually began to modify the 'classification' of what it is to be a man, through the repeated behaviour and practices of a group of individuals, unified through their admiration and imitation of their idol/s. These fans were often those who were particularly

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censured and operating on the periphery of society, lacking in power and denied a public voice, such as women, homosexuals, ethnic minorities and the lower classes. For these groups, glam rock and Bowie represented difference as a positive and rebellious force that gave them the opportunity to express their true nature and experiment with their identity in an act of self-expression. As Auslander points out;

Performers, then, are valuable to a particular audience not because they demonstrate definitively that they belong to the same identity category as the members of that audience but because they give those audience members material from which to construct the performer's identities in terms of their own identities and desires. (Auslander, 2006, 233-34)

This quote further emphasises the symbiotic relationship between Bowie and his followers, where, as an artist, Bowie responded to the interaction of his fans, by constantly reassembling his identity and performance to incorporate their needs and desires as well as his own. Apparently, through the continuous and very visible re-enactment of his disruptive and alternative masculinity by his fans, a fundamental shift in the regard of what it is to be a man occurred, thereby initiating an unstoppable tide of change in gender roles that continued throughout the 70s and 80s. The mechanisms of normative and classificatory regulation, where this transgression would have typically been controlled and brought to order through the pressure of social censure and condemnation, where 'classifying actions and ascribing human conduct and practices within our systems of cultural classification' (Hall, 1997, 234-235) are enforced, were at the time, apparently overwhelmed by the commercial and popular success of Bowie's glam rock personae and its consequent imitations by performers and fans, thereby supplying ample financial reason for its acceptance and even appropriation by the mainstream and traditional masculinity (Auslander, 2006). Bowie's ability to avoid cultural regulation through his constant reinvention and self-regulation that operated in response to the impulse of sub-cultures and popular culture thereby protected him from the negative results of public censure and condemnation.

However, as Hall notes, 'Of course, normative regulation frequently, and always in the end, breaks down – otherwise there would be no change, and the world would simply repeat itself to infinity'. (Hall, 1997, 234). Hall's argument therefore emphasizes that this shift in the perception of gender was almost inevitable, and at the point that Bowie created Ziggy Stardust, marginalized groups in Western culture were seeking radical change in how they were perceived and treated, evidenced by the rise of the equal rights movement, second wave feminism and gay liberation.

Bowie seemed to possess an innate ability to gauge and tap into popular culture and the fundamental desire for equality prevalent at the time, and articulate this through his shifting identity and music. Watts (1972) commented on how Bowie's gender bending may have actually been a way to promote his imagery and music, stating that his 'sexual ambivalence established a fascinating game: is he, or isn't he?' This ties into the notion of the commodification of his identity where he packaged his various personae to 'sell' to specific audiences, such as the gay community. However, despite the confusion of Bowie's 'fascinating game', it is acknowledged that he was part of the process that initiated the sexual liberation of a large percentage of his audience, through disarming the forces of normative regulation, as alternative gender constructions and sexualities became acceptable and even desirable.

### ***Glam Rock, Bowie and the 70s***

To begin Bowie's story and understand how cultural regulation has shaped his biography and how he has also helped to alter normative regulation it is necessary to begin with his early incarnations, but particularly that of Ziggy Stardust. This specific persona can be seen to be challenging the normative regulation of gender in the 70s, as the shared values of what constituted a man and masculinity, were transgressed by Bowie, as well as other performers of the glam rock genre. As Stevenson states,

If the cracks in the regulation of identity had started to emerge in the fifties, by the sixties they were becoming huge social and cultural transformations. While society remained heavily regulated by divisions of gender, race and class, the possibility of escaping these 'facts of nature' - if just for the moment - was becoming increasingly apparent. The popular music and commercial culture of the seventies offered the chance to escape into a different world where it was possible to shape a 'new you' to metamorphose into a different kind of human being. What emerges from the sixties, after the decline of the counter-culture, is the possibility of remaking the self under new directions and influences. (Stevenson, 2006, 39)

Glam rock therefore increased the intensity of the rebellion against the normative regulation of what it looked like to be a man in the 70s (and Suzie Quatro could be seen to be challenging what it looked like to be a woman, as part of that genre). Although as stated earlier, glam rock was regarded as largely apolitical, particularly in comparison with 60s artists such as Bob Dylan, its challenge to normative regulation and therefore authority, can be seen as an inherently radical and political act. As part of a larger cultural impulse towards

fundamental change begun in the 60s, the 70s represented the development of a profound and pervasive alteration across all aspects of Western society.

Soon after his breakout hit *Space Oddity* in 1969, Bowie implemented his newfound fame to explore gender and further influence glam rock through the release of his 1971 album, *The Man Who Sold the World*. Controversy surrounded the album's cover art, in which Bowie posed in a dress, provocatively suggesting through his visual aesthetic, that individuals could choose how to express their gender identity, regardless of their biological sex. Stevenson explores this notion saying,

Hence the ambivalence of the image is that even while Bowie is pictured wearing a dress, he does so in a way that retains his masculinity. This is an important point which will become more apparent in the discussion...of the imagery and cultural codes utilized by Bowie to suggest different masculine possibilities for gay and straight men. (Stevenson, 2006, 44)

This validates the idea that Bowie was supporting the war against gender stereotypes, starkly contrasting the mainstream masculine values being presented by his male contemporaries, such as Bob Dylan, and offering a different way to perform masculinity, thereby denying the culturally acceptable criteria set for men by classificatory regulation.

Leading on from this, April 1972 saw Bowie having sufficient influence as a popular artist, to release Ziggy, the first of his alter egos, to commercial success through a performance on BBC's mainstream, and family friendly *Top of the Pops* (BBC 1, 1964-2006) only months after stating 'I'm gay and always have been' (Watts, 1972). Ziggy appeared on the show, presenting his alien and androgynous appearance and shocking the more traditional elements of the audience with a performance which deviated away from normative masculinity and sexuality, and with the potential to initiate a similar backlash as to his former cover art.

Bowie flirted with camp imagery, dressed in a figure-hugging cat-suit, whilst he suggestively placed his arm around guitarist Mick Ronson. It has been proposed that this performance caused glam rock to explode on to the music-scene, as an audience of fifteen million were exposed to a spectacle of deconstructed masculine hegemony and ambiguous gender.

However, this time, the audience responded more positively with affirmation and acceptance, after rejecting him only a year previously (Stevenson, 2006, p45). Despite Ziggy countering the model of the 'strong' man, which 'embodies the idealised man' (Chapman and Rutherford 1988, 24) for a normative female audience, he had managed to present

'ambiguous sexuality' and his alternative model of masculinity as attractive to women. This

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is evidenced by the reaction of female fans who, according to Tom Howard writing for the NME (2016),

were on Beatlemania levels. At the peak of it, Bowie was sneaking into venues because screaming girls would queue outside just to try and touch him. There are YouTube videos of girls bawling their eyes out after he'd outwitted them and snuck in round the front, instead of round the back where they were waiting. (Howard, 2016)

This female adulation of the sexually ambiguous Ziggy, then allowed Bowie's male audience and fans to become far less concerned about being associated with his gender fluid appearance and behaviour, thereby decreasing the traditional concept of masculinity of 'one must not be a woman' (Anderson, 2013). Although Tim Edwards (1997, 471) suggests that most 'identities remain remarkably constant', the younger generation were now rebelling against the norm, through adapting and impersonating characteristics of Ziggy, suggesting that masculinity in general was facing radical change, and becoming anything but constant. This can be seen with the emergence of a plethora of new music movements, such as punk rock and new romanticism that offered vastly different variations of masculinity, which all opposed the traditional model. However, as suggested by Auslander the forces of normative and classificatory regulation were not that easy to escape and many fans suffered physical as well as verbal abuse for their alternative presentation of masculinity, and even Bowie himself received threats and condemnation for his challenge to established gender roles.

The safe spaces initiated by glam rock included concert halls and the living rooms and bedrooms where glam rock fans might see the performers on television, listen to their recordings, and gaze at their images. But carrying the identities forged in these spaces into more public places carried a risk for both performers and audience members... Although glam rock made it more possible to enact queer identities in public, it could not completely shield its adherents from the real world consequences of their experiments... While touring the United States early in 1971, Bowie was threatened with physical harm for wearing one of his Mr Fish dresses in Texas. (Auslander, 2006, 230)

This form of cultural regulation, which presents change and the challenge to normative criteria as something to fear, operates effectively to maintain order and the status quo, and as Hall states,

our social worlds would inevitably fall apart if social practices were entirely random and 'meaningless', if they were not regulated by shared meanings, values and norms – rules and conventions about 'how things are done in this culture'. (Hall, 1997, 234)

However as already noted, Hall also concedes the criteria for classificatory regulation must change so that the world does not 'repeat itself to infinity' (234). Bowie's rebellion through the creation of his androgynous persona Ziggy Stardust can be seen to offer other artists a new way to explore their own performances, and the audience a new way to explore their own identity, therefore bringing about a gradual but unstoppable transformation in the criteria for gender performance. Bowie effectively demonstrated to the world the liberation offered by rejecting stringent gender roles and labels thereby ensuring that it did not 'repeat itself to infinity' and also offering a voice and form of expression to marginalised groups.

### ***Bowie, the 80s and the New Man***

However, after the 'suicide' of Ziggy Stardust, Bowie transformed into new personae such as Aladdin Sane, a being who 'mutates beyond gender' (Perrott 2015), and the Thin White Duke. With the latter, it could be suggested that Bowie was retiring from glam rock and its flamboyant behaviour, with this persona donning a cabaret style wardrobe. However, with Ziggy, Bowie had effectively shifted the concept of masculinity, and allowed men 'to play around with style' (Chapman and Rutherford 1988, 41). The Thin White Duke was far more heteronormative than Ziggy and Aladdin Sane, however he still retained a camp sensibility, which can be viewed as a political act.

Some cultural theorists like David Halperin (1995) argue that camp is essentially a form of resistance for gay men, given its ability to parody the 'normal' and invite us to view it as being as constructed as anything else. (Stevenson, 2006, 53)

As Stevenson points out even the Thin White Duke can still be seen as subversive in nature by offering up another alternative masculinity to be donned and performed in much the same way as Bowie's previous incarnations. However, in terms of challenging normative and classificatory regulation, the heteronormative nature of this persona was far more acceptable in that it adhered to the criteria for normative regulation far more closely. What also happened in the time between Ziggy and The Thin White Duke, was that the criteria by which to measure masculinity had actually shifted, meaning that his 'camp sensibility' had become less closely associated with queer culture, and more a feature of the 'metrosexual' man (Anderson, 2013). This reduced challenge to cultural regulation therefore meant Bowie was seen as less rebellious and radical and more a part of the music establishment, and transitioned Bowie into a global, mainstream phenomenon in the 80s. Although it seems

that at this time Bowie distanced himself from his earlier claims to ambiguous sexuality because of his major commercial success, it should be recognised that. ‘Bowie’s commercialism – donning style as if it were a hat – was a part of his modus operandi from the beginning of his career.’ (Waldrep, 2004, 109). In this way it can be theorised that Bowie’s sexuality and his presentation of masculinity, although an integral part of his identity as a performer, were always a reflection of what was happening in the forefront of sub-culture. Bowie always had the ability to tap into the subconscious stirrings of alternative culture and successfully adapt them into an initially challenging, but commercially palatable model of self-identity. This can be seen as a form of self-regulation that Bowie adopted and was ultimately taken up by his followers, in order to stay current and relevant. For Bowie a stable identity represented stagnation and even career suicide, so the continuous and restless shift of his personae became indistinguishable from those occurring in postmodern culture itself, where his fluid and fragmented identity was a touchstone for rebellion and rejection of the establishment. As Stevenson notes of Bowie in this period,

His durability seems to say that while the stars of his generation have imploded, disappeared or become stuck in endless cycles of repetition, he continues to refashion himself. (Stevenson, 2006, 81)

Edwards suggests that throughout the 80s, men in Western culture had ‘greater freedom... then ever before’ (Edwards 1997), with Bowie and glam rock initiating the transformation of masculinity and gender roles. With the second wave of feminism in the late 70s having a fundamental impact on the concept of gender, and implementing a simultaneous shift in masculinity, Rutherford (1988, 226) suggests that this caused traditional masculinity to be ‘pathologised’ and become unpopular in mainstream culture, therefore leading to the emergence of the New Man model of masculinity. This model allowed men to accept and incorporate the feminine aspect of their identity, and consequently blur the gender dividing line. Despite suggestions that this model was only a ‘figure of advertising’ a tool for ‘marketing rather than progress in sexual politics’ (Edwards 2006, 110), the commercialisation of the model supports the idea that it was accepted by the mainstream and threatened to replace the traditional ‘strong’ man model, thereby implementing a further shift in masculinity. This perception of the New Man model relates to Stevenson’s assessment of Bowie and his personae as ‘commodities’. As he states,

**Comment [A8]:** Shall we stick with one form, either ‘80s’ or ‘1980s’ throughout you paper please?

**Comment [A9]:** Same, ‘70s’ used above – just need consistency pls

We need to remember that above all Bowie maintains his position in our culture because he has been successfully marketed as a product. This is particularly evident during the eighties but is also apparent in the emphasis he places on the liberation that is achieved by constant change, which is of course designed to keep the cash tills ringing. (Stevenson, 2006, 86)

The relationship between Bowie's New Man image and capitalism is certainly another aspect of The Thin White Duke's acceptance by the mainstream, and explains to some extent the lack of repercussion from the forces of cultural regulation, as the 'branding of David Bowie in this respect was part of a broader economic and political strategy to re-establish control over cultural and musical production' (Stevenson, 2006, 89). This point emphasises the earlier speculation that cultural regulation and the mainstream will always adjust and eventually assimilate the subversive and transgressive, with the intention to maintain control and establish order. This can also be seen in operation in the context of the AIDS crisis in the 80s, where performers such as Bowie and Freddy Mercury, whose connection with queer culture and ambiguous sexuality saw them face increasing public hostility, could be seen as a contributing factor to Bowie's adoption of a more heteronormative image at this time (Stevenson, 2006, 100).

There appeared to be little change in the notion of gender or masculinity in the 80s after the emergence of The New Man, due to the fact 'no lead was taken by a popular media' (Gauntlett 2008, p143), and although artists such as Madonna, Prince, Morrissey, Marc Almond, Brett Anderson, Boy George and Marilyn, were challenging the social mores of respectability and shocking audiences, they were no longer able to influence audience behaviour and identity in the way Bowie had in the 70s. In terms of the normative and classificatory regulation of their image, identity and behaviour, these new progeny of rebellion benefitted from Bowie's legacy of breaking down the boundaries of acceptability. In fact, their challenging of gender and sexuality could be seen as part of a neatly packaged consumer product that actually operated within the parameters of mainstream culture, as reconfigured by Bowie himself. Cultural regulation, through having to accommodate the acceptance of these radical shifts in gender, meant that public censure and condemnation were no longer effective, and had even become part of the marketing of the artists who were Bowie's successors. Appropriation of these figures by mainstream, postmodern culture saw Bowie struggle to reinvent himself in any meaningful or radical way that could impact on audiences as he had done in the past. However, although Bowie was not actively rebelling against the new masculine hegemony in the 80s, he still helped to develop a new definition of

masculinity that enabled male audience the chance to explore their gender more freely within the broader parameters of the New Man model, without the fear of repercussions enforced by cultural regulation.

### ***Bowie, the 90s' Backlash and Lad Culture***

Bowie's solo career took a break towards the end of the 80s, which coincided with a growing, backlash resistance from a younger generation of men, against the New Man model and the changes in masculinity brought about by second wave feminism and glam rock. Towards the end of the decade, with increasingly more men 'feeling battered' (Faludi 2000, 54) by these changes and the new models of masculinity, the New Lad emerged in the UK during the 90s, championing a return to the values of masculine superiority. The aggressive approach assumed by the New Lad, with bands such as Oasis and Blur asserting a new brand of male superiority, The New Man model soon came under threat. This movement itself can be regarded as a form of cultural regulation, albeit a slow moving and rather delayed one that sought to admonish the attack on white, heterosexual maleness, by the likes of Bowie and his New Man advocates. This new masculinity signalled a return to traditional male values and behaviours, but was nuanced by a postmodern irony that sought to distinguish itself as contemporary and relevant to a new generation of men. Men and women alike, who objected to the sexism and misogyny of Lad culture, soon found themselves at the mercy of social censure and condemnation from its supporters (such as the editors and writers of *Nuts* and *Zoo* magazines), with the added frisson of post-modern playfulness and irony. So in a strangely circular manner, cultural regulation of gender roles and masculinity appeared from within the rebellion, rather than from outside. As Stevenson postulates,

Brit pop like Brit Art, was concerned with mass popularity. It was the kind of laddishness Bowie had exhibited in the early nineties, with Tin Machine that was to become the focal point for popular music. The invention of the category 'new lad' meant for a new lease of life for many masculine icons of the seventies. (Stevenson, 2006, 126).

This return to a more traditional style of masculinity was prominent throughout the 90s with the rise of Lad culture, which represented ideological views in contrast to the 'pro-feminine male' (Edwards 2006, p.34), or the New Man. It has been theorised that the concept of the New Lad was simply a defensive reaction to the shift away from traditional masculinity seen in the 70s and 80s, which sought to reassert masculinity as a male bastion. It could be argued that like the New Man, the New Lad was heavily influenced by social movements and



popular-culture, in this case, third wave feminism and Brit-Pop, where bands celebrated 'youthfulness and new ladishness' (Hawkins 2009, p53). Many men returned to this new masculine hegemony as it was 'easier... to be a lad than a New Man' (Holland 2004, p29). Despite this, the New Man model was still popular with many who had bought into it, implying that both models co-existed and were accepted as different versions of masculinity in society. Bowie's return in 1993 challenged Brit-Pop's downplaying of flamboyancy as he continued to explore theatrical imagery, rather than the heightened and excessive masculinity of the New Lad. As Waldrep identifies

'Bowie's major projects in the nineties offered his fans the ability to assemble and replay his career in whatever form they wished. He has provided all the parts, in other words, for one to assemble, as many versions of David Bowie as one would like' (Waldrep, 2004, 131)

Bowie's masculinity and gender were no longer a major concern for a fan-base and contemporary audience who were defining this for themselves. With an ever expanding range of masculinities to choose from, Bowie became liberated from the restrictions of self-regulation and the constant need to reinvent himself in order to remain ahead of popular culture. However, what must be considered is that the forces of normative and classificatory regulation were still in operation, but having adjusted to and assimilated the changes in criteria relevant to gender performance and masculinity, appear to be dormant. Whereas in fact what had actually happened was that the impact of postmodernity, and consumerism as part of that movement, had caused a re-evaluation of the criteria we measure our shared values and meanings by in Western culture. This therefore presented a far more liberal and accepting culture as compared to previous decades, that accommodated changes in the perception of gender and masculinity, rather than condemning them.

### ***Bowie, the 2000s and the End of Gender?***

At the turn of the millennia, Bowie was entering his fourth decade in the public eye, but declining album sales, although possibly also due to piracy and major changes in the distribution of music, still suggest a loss of engagement with and relevancy for, youth culture, who were seeking and finding identification with younger artists. Although Bowie had explored gender fluidity throughout his career, Dyer (1979, 10) argues that he, Prince and Madonna, were not a relatable 'product' for a younger audience, born after these artists' rebellious and commercial decades. Although releasing *Reality* and embarking on *A Reality Tour* in 2003-2004, David Bowie 'abandoned his public' (Trynka 2011, 395) and became

reclusive, after suffering a heart attack and surgery in 2004. Although there were now various modes of masculinity available and acceptable in society, the representation of gender was still not as fluid at this time, in the way the controversial images of Ziggy Stardust presented it as in the 70s. The function of cultural regulation at this point could be seen as a gradual contraction towards conservatism, where men were becoming as commodified as women and their 'feminisation' through the use of grooming products and an interest in fashion, simply became a part of a new 'masculine' regime (Chapman and Rutherford, 1988).

With male stars, such as Adam Lambert and Mika, echoing Bowie's gender-bending performances and fashion, but failing to attain global popularity on the same scale, it could be proposed that there was no longer a need to radically challenge masculinity or gender roles and therefore such performers were received and judged purely on their music and performances, rather than being seen as radical and rebellious. However, 'Lady Gaga suggests... that gender is much more fluid than popular perceptions about it might indicate' (Gray 2012, 74). After erupting onto the music scene in 2008 and maintaining a high profile and popularity, particularly with the gay community ever since, it is apparent that a female artist can also challenge masculinity. Gaga's direct challenge to binary gender was showcased at MTV's VMAs in 2011, where she arrived at the event as her male persona Joe Calderone. Similar to Bowie's video for *Boys Keep Swinging*, Calderone fulfils Butler's (1990, 25) notion that gender is 'performatively constituted', particularly as Gaga performed as a male character with heightened and excessive masculine traits, representing the New Lad model. Gaga's intentions appear to be similar to Bowie's, in that they challenge masculinity and gender and are inclusive of fluidity.

With Gaga reinvigorating the deconstruction of gender for a new generation, this notion was soon re-appropriated by Bowie himself, who returned to music in 2013 with his penultimate album, *The Next Day*. Bowie's video for *The Stars (Are Out Tonight)* reflected a 'convergence of gender' (Bowie, 2013), and it could be suggested that he was trying to further popularise or even reintroduce the notion of gender fluidity across the generations. It could also be suggested that as the album was a commercial and critical success that contemporary audiences are receptive and openly seeking engagement with such ideas.

## ***Conclusion***

Bowie's final album, ★, or Blackstar, released worldwide through ISO, RCA, Columbia, and Sony (thereby relating back to Du Gay's and Hall's notion of cultural production) "on 8<sup>th</sup> January 2016, coinciding with Bowie's 69th birthday" is a self-reflexive consideration of his career, which, however, contains little contemplation of gender fluidity, other than the 'canny gender-bending' (Dombal, 2016) lyric 'she punched me like a dude'. With the album's artwork being noticeable for the Starman's absence, it could be that he has truly left the task of challenging cultural regulation and the restrictive criteria for gender to other artists. Bowie's initial impact as an artist helped to give a voice and an identity to marginalised groups with the creation of a new definition of masculinity, which encouraged other performers to challenge gender boundaries even further. Perhaps Bowie's final intention was for contemporary artists to take up the torch, and as he did in the 1970s, challenge the concept of gender, through revealing its true nature as fluid and ultimately free, thereby flouting normative culture, which sought to contain and maintain gender roles, servicing the requirements of capitalism. Certainly the mechanisms of cultural regulation are redefined for a new era and a new century and they operate in a less conventional manner, but gender is still at the centre of controversy, and restrictive practices are still functioning in relation to those who dare to subvert or transgress gender roles. So it must be recognised that there is still a need for a radical and revolutionary voice like Bowie's, to speak out for the disempowered and marginalised groups, who still remain outside cultural and societal norms.

**Comment [A10]:** But the promo work around might suggest something else...  
Checked this out again – all looks pretty heteronormative? Do you want me to change this?

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