

Mickey Mouse has Grown Up a Cow: David Bowie and the Society of the Spectacle

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Abstract

From the gender-bending alien rock messiah, Ziggy Stardust, to the elder statesman of rock, David Bowie redefined what it meant to be a rock star with his ever-changing personae and theatrical stage shows. Yet Bowie was more than a rock star. This paper presents a critical analysis of Bowie's five-decade career, drawing connections with Situationist revolutionary theory and Bowie's subversive approach to his art. While some have argued that Situationism died with the dissolution of the Situationist International, I argue that David Bowie claimed the theory and kept it alive by turning his own life into a work of art.

Introduction

It was a god-awful small affair—waiting outside the Brooklyn Museum on that frigid March morning. I had anticipated far more overzealous David Bowie fans would amass early enough to beat the crowd that was sure to converge on the scene. After all, the museum's social media offered a stern warning about the high demand for tickets and the limited amount of auditory equipment necessary for the total immersion experience. So, there I stood with about twenty others, shivering, the wind gusts seeming ever colder. My travel companion tried in vain to convince me to surrender my place in line to retrieve our coats from the hotel. Coats would be a hindrance once inside. I had no desire to carry it with me for hours or worse, wait in another line to leave it at coat check. Besides, the crowd was slowly growing in number and leaving then was out of the question. I needed every precious minute inside the exhibition; I could suffer in the cold a little while longer for David Bowie.

When the museum doors finally opened all self-inflicted misery evaporated, and a sense of urgency manifested itself in the crowd. We passed through the entrance leisurely enough, but those of us who were determined began a silent, mutually understood, and totally bizarre foot race to locate the exhibition's entrance. The signs led us to the back of the building and up the elevators to the fifth floor. Now the signs pointed to the right, then to the left, then I do not know which direction. It was confusing and disorienting. How ridiculous we must have looked—adults racing through the giant maze of a building, hardly noticing any of the fine art, as if we were competing for access to Bowie himself. I had set out on this Bowie research quest months before, so when I finally reached the entrance to *David Bowie Is*, I felt as though I had truly made it through the labyrinth, ready to finish my examination of the Goblin King.

When David Bowie died in 2016, the world took notice. What intrigued me about Bowie's death was not only the outpouring of genuine grief from fans and media personalities, but also how Bowie's passing did not quickly fade from public memory like so many other cultural icons. Was he really that significant? This is how I entered the Bowie labyrinth. Every question only led to another question. What began as a gender identity inquiry led to an exploration of art, theater, music, literature, film, dialectics, metaphysics, psychology, youth subculture, political theory, pop-culture,

the occult—such is the complexity of David Bowie’s work. Viewing a Bowie costume under the same roof as a Picasso painting began to make sense. Clearly Bowie was more than a rock star.

From the gender-bending rock messiah, Ziggy Stardust, to the elder statesman of rock, David Bowie redefined what it meant to be a rock star with his ever-changing personae and theatrical stage shows. He was a writer, musician, actor, producer, artist, critic, businessman, and so much more. Bowie built a five-decade career based on constant change, never allowing himself to be pigeonholed by the media. There is no definitive David Bowie. But why did Bowie make it his life’s mission to defy definition? The answer to this question lies hidden in plain sight. The totality of Bowie’s career can be best understood as the critical theory of Situationism put into practice. While some have argued that Situationism died with the dissolution of the Situationist International in 1972, I argue that David Bowie claimed the theory and kept it alive by turning his own life into a work of art.

Situationist International

Established in 1957, Situationist International (SI) was a revolutionary-minded group of artists and intellectuals who developed a social critique of modern society based on anti-authoritarian Marxism and modern avant-garde art movements. The SI began primarily as an artistic movement with its roots in the Lettrist International, the International Union for a Pictorial Bauhaus, and the London Psychogeographical Society.¹ As their name suggests, group membership was international, but overwhelmingly Western European. The SI claimed that Surrealism and Dada had been taken to the absolute limits, and the next movement in art should be art’s transcendence by merging art with life, something that Pop-Art and other movements failed to do because they were not radical enough. Therefore, the SI viewed themselves as the only true heirs of the Surrealists and Dadaists.² The SI became far more focused on politics after 1962 when Guy Debord became the group’s de facto leader, but the group’s philosophy of art remained crucial to their revolutionary theory.

Debord published his *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, SI’s best known and most influential intellectual output. The work is 221 theses that collectively constitute SI’s social/political theory. The work is a critique of all consumer societies, capitalist democracies as well as communist dictatorships, which maintain the same commodity system.³ Debord argues that since Marx first produced his theory, the nature of the commodity had dramatically changed, but Marx’s theory was generally correct—the theory was just not totally understood and needed to be expanded upon to reflect the growth of a spectacular global society.⁴ Debord’s critique is directly influenced by Cold War conditions: Communism’s failure to eliminate class and the rapid, post-war spread of consumerism. The low quality of life experienced by all, despite an abundance of everything humanly imaginable, is the main concern of Debord’s theory. Debord claimed the proletariat was no longer limited to the traditional working-class but had expanded to include most of the world’s population. Debord did not believe any social critique was useful if it did not put forward a solution. SI theory was meant to be put into revolutionary practice.

¹ Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oakland: PM Press, 2018), 63.

² *Ibid.*, 96

³ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 51-52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

The concept of the spectacle is essential to Debord's work. The spectacle is social life mediated by images. Debord clarifies that this is not limited to the mass media, but that images are the accumulation of capital.⁵ It is quite literally the transference of human power to the commodity, which has taken on metaphysical aspects.⁶ The spectacle exists only to promote itself and its power is autonomous. The spectacle produces total alienation in all areas of life. People are alienated from each other, themselves, and everything they produce.⁷ Rather than being freed from labor, all people—except the wealthiest—are enslaved to the commodity.⁸ This enslavement creates a population of passive spectators who can only observe life rather than participate in it. Life is turned upside down, and Debord's theory hopes to turn it right side up again. To subvert the spectacle, SI calls for a revolution of everyday life.

Becoming David Bowie

David Bowie was born David Robert Jones on January 8, 1947, in the working-class neighborhood of Brixton, London. He came from a blended family and was the only child in common to his parents.⁹ Bowie's father was head of public relations for Dr. Barnardo's Children's Homes, while his mother was an usherette at a movie theater. When Bowie was six, his family moved to suburban neighborhood of Bromley, just south of London. As a child, Bowie developed a passion for reading and American pop-culture.¹⁰ He attended Bromley technical school where the only subject he excelled in was art—which was taught by the father of legendary guitarist, Peter Frampton. While in school, Bowie pursued his growing musical interests, joining several different bands. When he left school at 16, Mr. Frampton got him a job at a London advertising agency. Bowie commuted to work every day from Bromley into London for over a year before quitting to pursue a music career full-time.¹¹

In London, Bowie became part of the mod scene while he worked tirelessly to break into the music business. He soon changed his name to David Bowie to distinguish himself from the newly famous member of the Monkeys with the same name. Bowie's 1967 self-titled debut album was a commercial failure, so his label dropped him. As Geoffrey Marsh points out, this period became very important to Bowie's development as an artist.¹² He was introduced to several different experiences and people in the London underground scene. One of the most significant meetings during this period of "cultural gestation,"¹³ according to Bowie, was Lindsay Kemp, a professional mime artist. Bowie studied under Kemp for over a year and periodically performed in Kemp's theatrical productions. What left the greatest impression on the developing Bowie was Kemp's commitment to breaking down the boundary between on-stage and off-stage life and his ideas about

⁵ Ibid 11

⁶ Ibid., 6.

⁷ Ibid 11

⁸ Ibid 10

⁹ David Buckley, *Strange Fascination: David Bowie: The Definitive Story*, (London: Virgin Books, 2005), 11.

¹⁰ Ibid., 17.

¹¹ Geoffrey Marsh, "Astronaut of Inner Spaces: Sundridge Park, SOHO, London...Mars," in *David Bowie Is*, Edited by Victoria Broackes and Geoffrey Marsh. (London: V&A, 2013), 30.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ David Bowie and Mick Rock, *Moonage Daydream: The Life and Times of Ziggy Stardust*. (New York: Universe, 2002), 70.

an elevated reality.¹⁴ Bowie consistently stressed the importance of his time with Lindsay Kemp, and it is through Lindsay Kemp that Bowie met with Situationist theory.

In 1964, Kemp had met Jim Haynes, a key figure in the 1960s counterculture with connections to some of the most influential authors and artists in Europe. Haynes's legacy includes opening The Paperback Bookshop & Gallery in 1959; the Traverse Theatre in 1963; co-organizing The Writers' Conference with Sonia Orwell (George Orwell's widow) and John Calder in 1962; opening the London Traverse Theatre Company in 1966; co-launching the newspaper *International Times*; and creating the Arts Lab.¹⁵ This list is by no means exhaustive. Of particular interest is Haynes's association with the Beat writer, Alexander Trocchi, who called himself the 'Cosmonaut of Inner Space.'¹⁶ Trocchi was an active British member of the Situationist International who was responsible for the spread of Situationist ideas through discourse and through publications in English. Trocchi firmly established an informal branch of Situationists in Britain, which included Jim Haynes.¹⁷ After befriending Lindsay Kemp, Haynes raised enough money so Kemp and his dance company could return to England where Haynes went on to produce several of Kemp's plays.¹⁸ Therefore, when Bowie came under the influence of Kemp, he also came under the influence of the British Situationists.

While Bowie toured with Kemp he became personally acquainted with Jim Haynes. Haynes reports in a timeline of his life that Bowie came to his Arts Lab on Drury Lane throughout 1967 to practice his music.¹⁹ It is significant that Bowie opened his own Arts Lab in Beckenham in 1969, the same year he also organized the non-profit seeking Free Festival. Haynes' influence is obvious in both ventures, and so are Situationist ideas about community arts projects and festivals.²⁰ There is no documented evidence that David Bowie ever became a member of the Situationists. The Situationist International came to Britain via different veins at different times.²¹ Trocchi was himself 'excommunicated' from official membership, along with most British Situationists because of their refusal to stop making art or for attempting to subvert the spectacle from within.²² Contact with these British Situationists, along with Lindsay Kemp's instruction, had a profound impact on the direction Bowie took with his career. Bowie made it his mission to use the power of celebrity and music to attack the spectacle from within.

The Man Who Sold the World

Alienation permeates David Bowie's work more than any other theme; likewise, alienation is the most prominent concern expressed by Guy Debord in *Society of the Spectacle*.

¹⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹⁵ Jim Haynes, "Life," January 2017. <https://www.jim-haynes.com/life/>. Accessed April 25, 2018.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Marsh, "Astronaut of Inner Spaces: Sundridge Park, SOHO, London...Mars," in *David Bowie Is*, Edited by Victoria Broackes and Geoffrey Marsh. (London: V&A, 2013), 35.

¹⁷ George Robertson, "The SI: Its Penetration into British Culture," in *What is Situationism? A Reader*, ed. Stewart Home, (San Francisco: AK Press, 1996), 121.

¹⁸ Jim Haynes, "Life," January 2017. <https://www.jim-haynes.com/life/>. Accessed April 25, 2018.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 84&95.

²¹ George Robertson, "The SI: Its Penetration into British Culture," in *What is Situationism? A Reader*, ed. Stewart Home, (San Francisco: AK Press, 1996), 121.

²² Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oakland: PM Press, 2018), 85.

According to Debord, “The spectacle’s social function is the concrete manufacture of alienation.”²³ The more that it produced, naturally more must be consumed, and this leads to a total separation from real lived experience. One’s entire existence becomes working to consume. True leisure time is an illusion which is also packaged and sold in a variety of forms, from vacations to pop-culture. This concept especially applies to the explosion of the suburbs in postwar Western society.²⁴ Each new home was filled with a plethora of modern conveniences, but each neighborhood consisted of nearly identical boring homes, while television sets reminded the occupants that there was certainly more to be bought that one did not even know one needed, thanks to commercial advertising. Bowie grew up in such a neighborhood.

Bowie launched a life-long career focused on alienation in 1969 with his first major success, “Space Oddity.” In the song, the astronaut, Major Tom, takes off on a space mission that at first is successful, but quickly goes wrong when communication with ground control is completely lost. Major Tom is doomed to a life alone floating aimlessly in space, totally isolated from the world. One producer originally scoffed at the song, claiming it was an underhanded attempt to profit from the Apollo 11 mission to the moon that would be underway within days of the song’s release.²⁵ While there is no doubt that Bowie was attempting to break into the music business, a closer analysis of the lyrics from a Situationist perspective reveals Bowie intended it to be far more than just a fun novelty song.

The song’s inspiration was the Cold War space race between the United States and Soviet Union that captivated the imaginations of millions. After liftoff, the voice of ground control says to Major Tom, “You’ve really made the grade, and the papers want to know whose shirts you wear.”²⁶ With this single line, Bowie turns the song into a mockery of its subject matter. The space race is a spectacular competition between capitalism and communism, and what matters to ground control is not the stunning human achievement, but rather which team jersey should be advertised by the media. Note that it does not matter which side wins, the result is the same either way. Major Tom is a personification of Bowie himself, who in the song becomes cognizant of the spectacle as the lyrics imply, “I’m stepping through the door and I’m floating in the most peculiar way. And the stars look very different today.”²⁷ Bowie is now aware of the true nature of the celebrity status he has worked relentlessly to achieve. Although “Planet Earth is blue,”²⁸ and Bowie feels helpless, he thinks his “...spaceship knows which way to go.”²⁹ It was a short-lived Situationist victory when “Space Oddity” was broadcast by the BBC during the lunar landing on July 20, 1969, and it matters not if most did not grasp the song’s irony—Bowie had found his subversive calling.

Bowie’s next studio album, *The Man Who Sold the World*, can be read as Bowie’s artistic letter of intent. On the album’s cover Bowie is nonchalantly sprawled across a chaise lounge wearing a long silk “man” dress and knee-high boots. His long, wavy blonde hair is topped with a simple black beret. A deck of cards is strewn about the floor, except for the one Bowie holds in his right hand as he gazes out at the viewer with an expressionless face. The cover image gives no indication of the

²³ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 174. Debord discusses the isolation imposed on the proletariat through planned communities.

²⁵ David Buckley, *Strange Fascination: David Bowie: The Definitive Story*, (London: Virgin Books, 2005), 61.

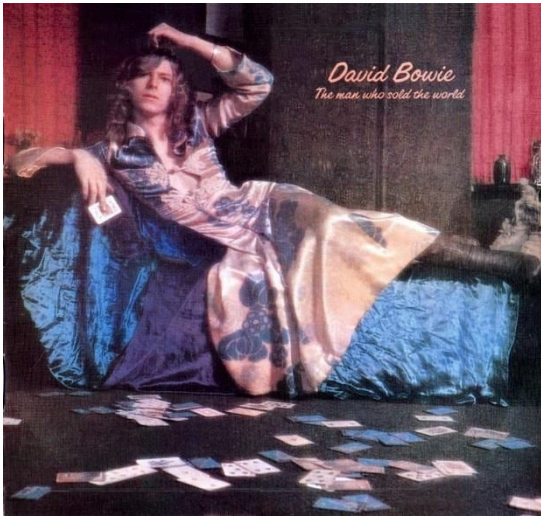
²⁶ David Bowie, “Space Oddity,” Recorded July 1969, track 1 on *David Bowie*, Philips, stereo LP.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

album's lyrical content, which stays true to the critique of modern society and its alienating effects, yet the album is entirely cohesive. What Bowie is doing with the image is employing a method that is crucial to SI theory called *detournement*. Detournement is defined in French as 'rerouting' or 'hijacking.' In SI theory, detournement is taking a socially acceptable cultural object or idea and putting it in a new context in such a way that the original meaning is subverted.³⁰ With his photographic homage to Pre-Raphaelite painting, he plans on turning Western society's notions of gender on its head.³¹ With this work, Bowie is openly declaring his revolutionary intent. He understands the rules of the game, and he intends to play the game by breaking them all. The cover art was so controversial it was banned in the United States.



The cover art for the United States release does closely resemble the album's content, albeit not nearly as shocking. This cover was also intended for release in Europe until Bowie decided to take the more controversial approach.³² The cartoon image is of a cowboy holding a blanket—covered gun while he passes by London's Cane Hill Asylum. The cowboy is modeled after the American icon John Wayne who has something to say but has been censored by the record company.³³ The asylum is a reference to the schizophrenic, fragmented reality produced by the spectacle. The cowboy's head has been blown to bits by the gun, and so has the clock tower. This image is significant because it symbolizes SI theory of spectacular time beautifully. John Wayne represents the American commodification of society who has usurped the experience of real lived time and replaced it with an artificial cyclical time to accommodate the needs of production. Time is essentially in a state of perpetual present, eliminating the social reality of death. With the absence of death comes the absence of life.³⁴

Bowie continued to toy with ideas about gender with his next album, *Hunky Dory*, but the album also contains the song that is perhaps Bowie's most direct critique of the spectacular society.

³⁰ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 110.

³¹ Several excellent works discussing David Bowie's cultural influence on gender and sexuality are available, especially recommended is Camille Paglia's essay in *David Bowie Is*.

³² Nicholas Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, (London: Titan Books, 2016), 341.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 86.

“Life on Mars,” according to Bowie, “was written out of revenge,”³⁵ and an absolute parody of Frank Sinatra’s “My Way,” thus the tune is dedicated on the album, “To Frankie.”³⁶ In 1968, before Bowie had any commercial success, he worked as a freelance songwriter. Bowie was given the task of writing English lyrics for the French song “Comme d’habitude,” but Paul Anka bought the rights to the song and wrote his own version, “My Way,” which was a major success for Frank Sinatra in 1969. Bowie was so upset that his version was rejected that he composed an entirely new set of lyrics in less than a day.³⁷ Bowie reworked the lyrics to the song yet again before he recorded it in 1971 to reflect not only his disappointment with the music industry, but also his disappointment with spectacular society. “Life on Mars” tells a story about a young girl; the song begins:

It’s a God-awful small affair to the girl with the mousy hair. But her mummy is yelling no, and her daddy has told her to go. But her friend is nowhere to be seen, now she walks through her sunken dream to the seat with the clearest view, and she’s hooked to the silver screen. But the film is a saddening bore, for she’s lived it ten times or more. She could spit in the eyes of fools as they ask her to focus on...³⁸

The song is, according to Bowie, “A sensitive young girl’s reaction to the media.”³⁹ In other words, a young girl’s reaction to the spectacle. She is caught in the middle of an argument between her parents. But the girl feels alone, alienated. Her hopes are shattered because her reality within the spectacle is limited to the images the spectacle chooses to show her. She is still hooked to the silver screen, however unimpressed she may be with the banality of the show.

Then begins the chorus, “Sailors fighting in the dance hall. Oh man look at those cavemen go. It’s the freakiest show. Take a look at the lawman beating up the wrong guy. Oh man wonder if he’ll ever know, he’s in the bestselling show. Is there life on Mars?”⁴⁰ The girl is frustrated that she is expected to find enjoyment with the same cinematic tropes dressed up as something new. Then Bowie shifts from the little girl’s media disenchantment to critique media coverage of real events, specifically May’68 in Paris and the police brutality inflicted on protestors. The lawman is oblivious of his role as spectacle enforcer. The final verse clarifies the root of society’s problems:

It’s on America’s tortured brow, that Mickey Mouse has grown up a cow. Now the workers have struck for fame, ‘cause Lennon’s on sale again. See the mice in their million hordes, from Ibiza to the Norfolk Broads. Rule Britannia is out of bounds. To my mother, my dog, and clowns. But the film is a saddening bore, ‘cause I wrote it ten times or more. It’s about to be writ again, as I ask you to focus on: repeat chorus.⁴¹

Bowie explicitly lays the blame on America for the commodification of the world via spectacular consumerism. He then criticizes communism by asserting that the worker’s strikes are a bid for power within the spectacle. Lennon can be interpreted literally, as in John Lennon, and therefore the hippie subculture and its failure to actualize change because it has become fashionable; or Lennon can be a play on words and actually refer to Lenin, in which case Bowie is saying that communism,

³⁵ David Bowie, “Life on Mars,” Interview, 2002. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5_C_HuIQM. Accessed March 24, 2018.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Nicholas Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, (London: Titan Books, 2016), 162.

³⁸ David Bowie, “Life on Mars”

³⁹ Nicholas Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, (London: Titan Books, 2016), 162.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ David Bowie. “Life on Mars,” 1972.

too, produces a commodified society. The mice are the people who are captivated by the modern spectacle that is increasing all over Europe. But all Britain can do is watch the movie play out in the theater of real life. Is there life on Mars, because there certainly is not in the society.

The Life and Times of Ziggy Stardust

Becoming a famous rock star may seem incompatible with Situationist revolutionary theory. According to Debord who writes, “Stars—spectacular representations of living human beings—project this banality into images of permitted roles, it is incompatible.”⁴² However, Bowie believed rock ‘n roll held real subversive power.⁴³ It is no coincidence that Ziggy Stardust is the antithesis of Debord’s statement. Ziggy is the spectacular representation of a non-human entity—spectacular alienation personified. With his bright red hair, outrageous style, and sexless body,

Ziggy is electrifying and forbidden. Ziggy is an alien prophet who has a message to deliver to society. Bowie unleashed Ziggy to communicate Debord’s thesis to the masses.

In 1967 another, lesser known work, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, was published by SI member Raoul Vaneigem. The SI revolution of everyday life means merging art with life to



transcend art and reclaim one’s power from the spectacle. *Society of the Spectacle* contains this theory; however, Debord does not elaborate on his theses, while Vaneigem’s work does. Everyone can defeat the spectacle’s control over their life because, as Vaneigem explains:

In creativity everyone possesses the ultimate weapon. But this weapon, like some talismans, must be used wittingly. Where creativity is mobilized against the grain, in the service of lies and oppression, it turns into a sad farce, and is duly consecrated as art. Acts that destroy Power and acts that construct individual free will have the same form but their range is different; as any good strategist knows, you prepare in different ways for defense and attack.⁴⁴

⁴²Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 24.

⁴³ David Bowie, Interview, BBC, 2002. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdL3NR9Yno0>. Accessed April 15, 2018.

⁴⁴ Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 165.

The problem with the spectacle is that few recognize the existence of the spectacle and its hold on their life. To expose the spectacle will begin the ultimate revolution. The creative power of the Situationist must be aimed toward revealing spectacular society through the construction of 'situations.' Bowie had been experimenting with situations since the Arts Lab, but Ziggy Stardust and the Spider from Mars are a situation par excellence.

Bowie packed nearly every detail of Situationist theory into Ziggy. Ziggy is a situational experiment who subverts the spectacular function of celebrity. To construct Ziggy's appearance, Bowie once again used the technique of *detournement*. Bowie appropriated Ziggy's look straight from Japanese culture and mashed it up with Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*.⁴⁵ Ziggy captivated his young audience when he appeared on the BBC's *Top of the Pops* in July 1972 with his instant hit single "Starman." In the chorus, Ziggy sings, "There's a starman waiting in the sky, he'd like to come and meet us, but he thinks he'd blow our minds. There's a starman waiting in the sky, he's told us not to blow it, cause he knows it's all worthwhile. He told me: Let the children lose it, let the children use it, let all the children boogie."⁴⁶ The starman is Bowie who speaks through Ziggy, telling the youth to forget their so-called rock idols and follow him into a life of creative child's play. With his blatantly constructed Ziggy Stardust character and his fake band, Bowie called into question the authenticity of every celebrity claiming to be who they appear. With Ziggy, Bowie became the leader of the revolution of everyday life.

Bowie took Ziggy (or Ziggy took Bowie) on an 18-month tour that passed through the UK, North America, and Japan in fabulous Situationist fashion. He avoided air travel as much as possible and opted for the train, bus, or car instead. In *Moonage Daydream*, the book Bowie co-authored with Mick Rock, Bowie, being quite the eccentric, writes, "After Denver we cannot continue by rail as whatever trains there don't run on the days, we need them. We will therefore go by Caravan-truck, or covered wagons or Pegasus-drawn chariots."⁴⁷ He then goes on to describe some of these train rides and other experiences with great fondness. Bowie even opted for the Trans-Siberian Express to get back to Europe after finishing the Japanese leg of the tour. By adventuring through different landscapes, roaming through different cities, Bowie was practicing what is termed *derive* in Situationist theory, which originated with the London Psychogeographical Society. The purpose of *derive* is to find the unexpected, the places that the spectacle keeps hidden, and to gauge the 'feel' of different environments.⁴⁸ Bowie practiced this technique throughout his life and often incorporated it into his art.

Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars played their last show together in July 1973, at the Hammersmith Odeon in London. Ziggy announced his retirement to the unexpecting crowd, "And that was that, really."⁴⁹ The spectacular media foolishly interpreted Ziggy's pronouncement as Bowie's intent to walk away, and David Buckley claims this falsity was encouraged by Bowie.⁵⁰ With Ziggy, Bowie achieved what SI calls, "Ultra-detournement, that is, the tendencies for detournement to operate in everyday social life (e.g. passwords or the wearing of disguises, belonging to the sphere

⁴⁵ David Bowie and Mick Rock, *Moonage Daydream: The Life and Times of Ziggy Stardust*, (New York: Universe, 2002), 12.

⁴⁶ David Bowie, "Starman" 1972

⁴⁷ David Bowie and Mick Rock, *Moonage Daydream: The Life and Times of Ziggy Stardust*. (New York: Universe, 2002), 130.

⁴⁸ Guy Debord et al., *Situationist Anthology*, trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 62.

⁴⁹ David Bowie and Mick Rock, *Moonage Daydream: The Life and Times of Ziggy Stardust*. (New York: Universe, 2002), 271.

⁵⁰ David Buckley, *Strange Fascination: David Bowie: The Definitive Story*, (London: Virgin Books, 2005), 166.

of play),”⁵¹ Moreover, Bowie had finally established himself in the music industry as the leader of a new generation of rebels.

Long before Ziggy’s tour had come to conclusion, Bowie had already begun work for a new character, Aladdin Sane. Throughout the ‘70s, Bowie added several characters to his repertoire, and changed his sound just as often. Bowie moved through so many personae for the simple reason that doing so kept boredom at bay and creativity alive, which are main objectives in Situationist theory. However, there is another SI concept Bowie was trying to avoid: *recuperation*. Recuperation happens when the spectacle takes the subversive and integrates it into the spectacle so that it loses its subversive qualities.⁵² For Bowie to remain in control of himself as an artist, he must continually reinvent himself.

Bowie put the ‘70s to rest, along with his personae, with the eulogy, “Ashes to Ashes,” while also making it clear that he, “never did anything out of the blue.”⁵³ Every situation had been carefully thought out. Nevertheless, the spectacle was evolving, becoming stronger with new technology, according to Debord, and the Situationist must evolve to combat it.⁵⁴ Thankfully with Bowie, his spaceship always knew which way to go.

I Can’t Give Everything Away

It is a misconception to conclude that David Bowie could not be a Situationist if he was openly participating in a capitalist economy. The two can co-exist. In fact, if one is to undertake any great project that seeks to negate the spectacle, capital is an absolute necessity. Debord himself developed a close working relationship with the wealthy Gerard Lebovici.⁵⁵ While ideally Debord and his militant cohorts would have liked very much for May ’68 to have spelt the end of capitalism in France, the theories published in 1967, along with all other Situationist essays written since the group’s founding are far more pragmatic by expecting the revolution to be an extremely long-term process of transformation. As Debord says in the *Society of the Spectacle*, “A critique seeking to go beyond the spectacle must know how to wait.”⁵⁶

Bowie’s fame reached new heights in 1983 with the release of *Let’s Dance*. Bowie sought out Nile Rodgers to produce his ‘50s and ‘60s blues inspired album precisely because Rodgers had a reputation as a hit maker.⁵⁷ Fans and critics alike felt Bowie had ‘sold out’ with his mainstream pop-album even though Bowie’s past endeavors were no less commercial. Bowie changed his appearance and sound, but this was nothing new from Bowie. What had changed was the music industry. “The 1980s had finally caught up with what Bowie had been doing since around 1968—mixing media,”⁵⁸ says David Buckley. Bowie had no small part in determining how the 80s were to look and sound, and he wanted to cash in on it. This does not mean Bowie left his Situationist tendencies behind. On the contrary, he found new, often more overt ways to subvert.

⁵¹ Guy Debord et al., *Situationist Anthology*, trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 68.

⁵² Debord spectacle 103

⁵³ David Bowie, “Ashes to Ashes,” 1980.

⁵⁴ Debord, comments 4.

⁵⁵ Jappe. 105.

⁵⁶ Debord Spectacle. 117.

⁵⁷ Nicholas Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, (London: Titan Books, 2016), 401.

⁵⁸ David Buckley, *Strange Fascination: David Bowie: The Definitive Story*, (London: Virgin Books, 2005), .333.

Bowie's *Let's Dance* album remained faithful to the SI theory's requirement of social critique. A photograph of Bowie in boxing attire with his chin down and fists up makes up the album's cover. Bowie's fighting stance indicates he is still in the fight against the spectacle. The title track's lyrics are not obviously Situationist; however, when put into context with the cover, and more importantly the title track's video, Situationist intent is explicit. The video depicts a young Australian Aboriginal couple's experience with the capitalistic invasion of their world. After being awed by an array of consumer goods, they begin working hard-labor jobs so they too can consume. The red shoes the girl purchases are symbolic of capitalism.⁵⁹ The couple realizes their new way of life does not deliver the comfort and happiness it promised, so they leave the city. The video concludes with the girl throwing the red shoes in the dirt and stomping on them. Bowie is using his art to draw attention to the ill effects of capitalism and the exploitation of Aborigines in the process of globalization. In so doing, he was setting the standard for others to follow with their superstar status.

In the same year that his *Let's Dance* album was released, Bowie executed what may be his finest and most politically charged situation in his history. In a promotional interview for his new album with MTV VJ Mark Goodman, Bowie turned the interview around on the unsuspecting VJ. Bowie asked, "Having watched MTV over the past few months, it's a solid enterprise with a lot going for it. I'm just floored by the fact that there's so few black artists featured on it. Why is that?"⁶⁰ A four-minute discussion ensued in which Goodman tried to defend MTV's position. Bowie was astonished by Goodman's assertion that white mid-western kids may be frightened by an artist like Prince. None of Goodman's excuses satisfied Bowie given the hypocrisy of the station whose existence would be impossible had it not been for black artists. Bowie pointed out the obvious racist trends he saw in American media and called for it to change. This situation was social, it was political, it negated beautifully, and it tackled the media spectacle which is instrumental in perpetuating racism in America.

In the '80s Bowie channeled his passion for acting into a second career on stage and in film. He appeared in the critically acclaimed Broadway production *Elephant Man*, *Absolute Beginners*, *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence*, and more. Of particular interest is his role as Jareth in Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*. The film has a devoted cult following that has continued to grow since its release, despite being a commercial flop. *Labyrinth* was meant to be a coming of age tale about a teenage girl, Sarah, who must decide between remaining with her childhood fantasies and becoming a responsible adult. Sarah is stuck babysitting her baby brother and Sarah resents him for it. She discovers that one of her toys is missing and suspects the baby has it yet again. When she goes to retrieve the stuffed animal, her brother starts crying and she is unable to calm him. She is so frustrated that she says the magic words from one of her fairytale stories, asking the Goblin King to take her brother away. When the baby disappears, Sarah instantly regrets her decision and begs the Goblin King to return her brother. Jareth compromises with Sarah by giving her 13 hours to make her way to his castle beyond the goblin city at the center of a labyrinth. Then begins Sarah's fantastic journey through the labyrinth to find her baby brother where she finds plenty of friends to help along the way.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Nicholas Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, (London: Titan Books, 2016), 400.

⁶⁰ David Bowie, interviewed by Mark Goodman, MTV, 1983.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/videos/flashback-david-bowie-rips-into-mtv-for-not-spotlighting-black-artists-20160113>. Accessed April 12, 2018.

⁶¹ *Labyrinth*, Jim Henson, 1986, DVD.

Bowie's decision to play the part of the Goblin King is not at all confusing when his love of subversion is considered—and *Labyrinth* is a subversive fairytale. At the same time, it is an inconspicuous Situationist critique of the spectacle. Jareth is the spectacle. He is a master illusionist. He holds the power to alter Sarah's experience of time and her reality. Sarah is not hanging onto her childhood, rather the image of a childhood. Her room is packed full of 'things' that represent a childhood. Instead of caring for her brother, she prefers her isolation. She is willing to trade a real human relationship for the spectacle and she realizes her folly. To beat the spectacle, she must rely on others for assistance. When Sarah makes it the Goblin King's castle, Jareth makes it clear that he has done no wrong. He is neither good nor bad but has only given her everything she asked for. Finally, Sarah realizes that her reality is all an illusion, and she remembers the magic words, "You have no power over me."⁶² It is Sarah who gave her power away to the spectacle. The spectacle is powerful only because society allows it to be.

Bowie's success in the 1980s opened many new avenues for Situationist experimentation in the nineties. He removed himself from the spotlight, or rather became "a rock martyr,"⁶³ as David Buckley puts it, when he found his creativity lacking from being expected to produce popular music for the masses. Buckley argues that Bowie entered the mainstream because he wanted to. The way in which Bowie publicly bemoaned the effects of being a branded rock star scream of Situationist theory being put to the test. Bowie wanted to make money so he could pursue other things and when Debord's theory of celebrity proved true, Bowie backed out to take control back over his artistic output from the mega-music industry.

The role of avant-garde currents, wherever they may appear, is to link these people and these experiences together; to help unify such groups and the coherent basis of their project. We need to publicize, elucidate and develop these initial gestures of the forthcoming revolutionary era. They can be recognized by the fact that they concentrate in themselves new forms of struggle and a new content (whether latent or explicit): the critique of the existing world. Thus, the dominant society, which prides itself so much on its constant modernization, is now going to meet its match, for it has finally produced a modernized negation.⁶⁴

Since he met Lindsay Kemp in the late 1960s, Bowie remained one of these modernized negotiations the Situationists wrote about in 1963. But the quote also demonstrates another aspect of Situationist theory that Bowie always adhered to. Before he was himself a commercial success, he was promoting other artists like Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, Mott the Hople, and as with all lists of Bowie's accomplishments, the examples are too many to record here. The 1990s were merely a continuation of what Bowie had always done, with a few notable additions.

In 1997, Bowie invested in the small publishing company, 21. The company specialized in subversive art texts. The goal was to publish art books that demystified the pretentious art world by using everyday language to explain art theory and history so more people could have access to this area of study.⁶⁵ When Bowie was approached by William Boyd about publishing a fictional art history about an invented artist named Nat Tate, Bowie not only agreed, he used the idea to stage an elaborate situation. Bowie curated an exhibition featuring the fake artist. Nobody knew who this

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ David Buckley, *Strange Fascination: David Bowie: The Definitive Story*, (London: Virgin Books, 2005), 368.

⁶⁴ Guy Debord et al., *Situationist Anthology*, trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 403.

⁶⁵ David Buckley, *Strange Fascination: David Bowie: The Definitive Story*, (London: Virgin Books, 2005), 455.

artist was, yet no one spoke up. Some even suddenly had imagined recollections of possibly hearing about Nat Tate. Bowie read excerpts from Boyd's book at the event, telling the audience about the suicide of the washed-up artist. Bowie allowed the situation to play out, not telling anyone it was a hoax until after the exhibition.

When the internet was still in its infancy Bowie predicted in an interview how integrated it would become into modern culture. In the interview with BBC, Bowie talks about how he got into rock 'n roll because it seemed rebellious. He saw its power of subversion, but rock has since lost that edge. There is no one (raises hand) to lead the forces anymore. But now there is the internet and he sees its ability to replace what rock once was. The internet will have the power to forge community, despite companies like Microsoft.⁶⁶ This single interview is very telling. Bowie would have not been a rock star had the internet existed in the 1960s. He exposes his intent to lead an artistic revolution against the spectacle (Microsoft). But Bowie also invested in his own internet provider and then created a web forum to promote unknown artists. In addition, he predicted that music would one day be free because of the internet and encouraged fans to steal his music online.

Bowie's musical output in the 1990s, likewise remained experimental and critical of the spectacle in the period. In "I'm Afraid of Americans," the title speaks for itself. The song was inspired by a trip Bowie had taken to Indonesia where he was horrified to see a McDonald's.⁶⁷ In the song's conclusion, Bowie chants, "God is an American,"⁶⁸ over and over. Bowie is saying America is God because of the metaphysical power the spectacle holds over people. The commodity is modern religion.

Bowie suffered from a heart attack in 2004, which brought his musical output to a halt. He kept busy in plenty of other areas, but never again would he tour. Bowie had officially retired, or so it seemed. In 2013 Bowie released *The Next Day* with no warning, setting another standard as well.⁶⁹ The album was recorded in complete secrecy and not promoted in any way. On January 8, 2013 it was made available via the internet. The album release is interesting because the *David Bowie Is* exhibition was to launch very soon. Bowie in a museum means Bowie is history. But not in Bowie's case. He demands to write his own. This concept is at the very core of Situationist theory. To transform one's life is an artistic process, and this is how to take control of one's own history.

When Bowie was diagnosed with cancer, he kept it from the media and went to work on two projects. The first was a musical, *Lazarus*, realizing a life-long dream. He also started work on his final album, his parting gift to his fans.⁷⁰ The album is Bowie's final derive. Being Bowie, he loaded the album and its video with symbolism. In one song, "I Can't Give Everything Away," Bowie writes, "Seeing more and feeling less, saying no but meaning yes, this is all I ever meant, that's the message that I sent."⁷¹ Bowie's parting gift is the key to Bowie's career. He asks his audience to see the spectacular world in which they live. The spectacle is unreality. He truly was leading a revolution of everyday life with his message and his example. Bowie's death art is a final

⁶⁶ David Bowie, interview BBC, 1999. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LaHcOs7mhfU>. Accessed April 15, 2018.

⁶⁷ Nicholas Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, (London: Titan Books, 2016), 375.

⁶⁸ David Bowie, "I'm Afraid of Americans," *Earthling* 1997.

⁶⁹ Nicholas Pegg, *The Complete David Bowie*, (London: Titan Books, 2016), 461.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 502.

⁷¹ David Bowie, "I Can't Give Everything Away," *Blackstar*, 2016. Compact disc.

detournement of the spectacle. The spectacle demands a perpetual youth. By making his death visible in his art, the spectacle is unable to recuperate his life. Evidence of death is evidence of life.⁷²

Conclusion

David Bowie is undefinable, but it is clear he meant to live his life by his rules. Walking through the *David Bowie Is* it is clear that Bowie's British suburban upbringing was the single most determinant factor in his becoming. Of all the earliest influences, Situationist revolutionary theory is the only art theory capable of explaining the continuity, as well as the changes in Bowie's career. Bowie touched on every aspect of Situationism, excepting the violent militancy Debord came to expect from Situationists. Bowie transcended art by becoming art. David Bowie is a Situationist.

⁷² Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 86.

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