

BEING ZIGGY STARDUST:

A semiotic problem

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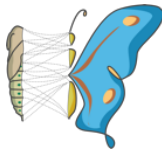
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Abstract. At its onset, David Bowie's self-fashioning as the alien superstar Ziggy Stardust was meant as an ironical response to rock'n'roll rhetoric of authenticity. But legend has it that Bowie soon came to identify himself more and more with his character, so much so, in fact, that he would start to believe he was indeed Ziggy Stardust. Rumors about him becoming delusional at the height of his success were supported by Bowie's own press interviews and public appearances and further enhanced by the massive fan craze surrounding his persona. While Bowie's alleged schizophrenic-like psychosis remains, for many reasons, a matter of dispute, the way it was carried out on- as well as offstage nonetheless suggests the curious situation in which a theatrical construct – in other words, a conventional sign-system – can encroach upon, and eventually displace, reality (be it psychological reality). As the character takes over the interpreter and the boundaries between fiction and reality become more and more blurry, a double phenomenon ensues. On one hand, the split-identity delusion has an undermining effect on the performance, for it inevitably destabilizes its constitutive parameters (stage-space and stage-time). On the other hand, and owing to the same indeterminateness, every act, every gesture – regardless if it's carried out on- or offstage – can be inscribed in the performance's order. This paper proposes to take a look at the ways in which Bowie's performance as Ziggy Stardust challenges the notion of performance understood as a self-enclosed event having an autonomous semiotic status.

Keywords: semiotics of performance, Peircean semiotics, cultural semiotics, popular culture, history of rock'n'roll music

Olla Ziggy Stardust: semiootiline probleem

Abstrakt. Alguses oli David Bowie kehastumine tulnukast superstaariks Ziggy Stardust mõeldud iroonilise vastusena rock'n'rolli autentsuse-retoorikale. Ent legend pajatab, et Bowie hakkas peagi üha enam oma tegelaskujuga samastuma, uskuma, et ta on tõepoolest Ziggy Stardust. Kuulduseid sellest, et ta oma karjääri tipul pettekujutelmade ohvriks sattus, toetasid Bowie enda intervjuud ja avalikud esinemised, samuti massiivne fännide hullustus, mis tema tegelaskuju ümbritses.



Ehkki Bowie väidetav skisofreenialaadne psühhoos on mitmel põhjusel vaieldav, siis viis, kuidas see nii laval kui väljaspool lava teostus, osutab ometi huvitavale situatsioonile, kus teatraalne konstrukt, mis on loodud kokkuleppelises märgisüsteemis, võib tungida (psühholoogilisse) tegelikkusesse ja seda viimaks asendama hakata. Kui tegelaskuju võtab tõlgendaja üle ning piirid tegelikkuse ja fiktsiooni vahel üha enam hägustuvad, tekib kahetine nähtus. Ühelt poolt õõnestab lõhenenud identiteedi luul etendust, kuna parataamatult destabiliseerib seda moodustavaid parameetreid (lavaruum ja lavataim). Teisalt on sellesama määramatuse tõttu võimalik iga žesti, sõltumata sellest, kas see viiakse ellu laval või väljaspool lava, võtta etenduse osana. Käesolev artikkel uurib viise, kuidas Bowie esinemine Ziggy Stardusti rollis esitab väljakutse etenduse kui autonoomset semiootilist staatust omava endassesuletud sündmuse mõistele.

Märksõnad: etenduslikkuse semiootika, Peirce'i semiootika, kultuurisemiootika, popkultuur, rock'n'rolli ajalugu

*'For he who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die'*
Oscar Wilde, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*

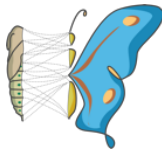
In the summer of 1971, young actor and musician David Bowie, still a struggling performer on the rock'n'roll scene, announced his plans for the near future:

I'm going to play a character called Ziggy Stardust. We're going to do it as a stage show. We may even do it in the West End. When I'm tired of playing Ziggy I can step out and someone else can take over for me. (quoted via Auslander 2006a: 111)

The success he subsequently encountered in the guise of Ziggy Stardust was nothing like the rather lukewarm reception he had had with his previous records. The story of 'the rise and fall'⁹ of a bisexual (or asexual) Martian Messiah who came to Earth as a rock'n'roll superstar in the attempt to save it from an impending catastrophe, only to fail and end up being killed by his fans elicited a strong fascination from young audiences world-wide. However, the three years of role-playing and intensive touring, all carried out against a background of ever-increasing substance abuse, seem to have taken a terrible toll on Bowie's mental state. In a 1976 interview he declared:

I fell for Ziggy too. It was quite easy to become obsessed night and day with the character. I became Ziggy Stardust. David Bowie went totally out the window.

⁹ *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spider from Mars* was released on the 6th of June 1972 and was produced by David Bowie and Ken Scott under the label of RCA Records. Besides Bowie, band members included Mick Ronson (guitar and vocals), Trevor Bolder (guitar), and Mick Woodmansey (drums). The songs outlining the story are: *Five Years*, *Soul Love*, *Moonage Daydream*, *Starman*, *It Ain't Easy*, *Lady Stardust*, *Star*, *Hang On to Yourself*, *Ziggy Stardust*, *Suffragette City*, and *Rock'n'roll Suicide*.



Everybody was convincing me that I was a Messiah, especially on that first American tour. I got hopelessly lost in the fantasy. (quoted via 5years.com)

Leaving aside, for now, the question of how credible such a strange turn of events actually is, the situation as described nevertheless suggests the possibility that what started as a performance of a character became a transformation into that character: or, in other words, what started as an ingeniously devised lie might have ended up not being a lie, after all. This is precisely why, as I will try to argue, before being a short-lived, possibly drug-induced, identity problem – a question which, no doubt on purpose, remains unanswered to this day – or a marketing strategy, which seems no less likely, ‘being Ziggy Stardust’ is a semiotic problem.

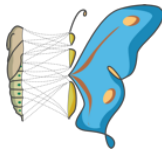
Thus, the sign system here under analysis is the one that builds up Bowie’s artistic persona, or, to put it more simply, *the impersonation* – not only because it constitutes the locus of the aforementioned dilemma, but also because it acts like a centripetal force for all the other sign systems that constitute the Ziggy Stardust act. The performance I will be looking at is the one which saw Bowie’s last impersonation of Ziggy Stardust in front of a live audience: the Hammersmith Odeon fare-well concert of July 3, 1973. This particular concert is not only the best documented one – it was filmed by D. A. Pennebaker and later released under the title *Ziggy Stardust: The Motion Picture*¹⁰ –, but, due to its special status as the tour’s final performance, can be considered the literal as well as the symbolic capstone of the entire act.¹¹

Constructing the perfect plastic rock’n’roll fantasy

The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars is the outcome of Bowie’s long-standing wish to write and perform a musical – a wish that was never fully accomplished, not in the conventional way, at any rate. The material for the album was originally conceived as a musical theatre show to be staged at London’s West End, one not very much unlike the era’s regular musical shows (Auslander

¹⁰ The recording circulated as a bootleg until it was officially released in 1983, also under the label of RCA Records. Alongside the most important songs featured on the album, the fare-well concert included songs from Bowie’s other albums (*Width of a Circle*, *Wild Eyed Boy from Free Cloud*, *Changes*, *All the Young Dudes*, *Oh! You Pretty Things*, *Cracked Actor*, and *Time*) as well as covers after other artists’ songs (*My Death*, after Jacques Brel’s *La mort*, Mick Jagger’s *Let’s Spend the Night Together*, and Lou Reed’s *White Light / White Heat*). The show commenced with the first movement from Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*.

¹¹ Toward the end of the show, just before singing *Rock’n’roll Suicide*, Bowie famously announced: “Of all the shows on this tour, this particular show will remain with us the longest because not only it is the last show of the tour, but because is the last show we will ever do”. As Philip Auslander observed, “[t]here can be no doubt that Bowie’s announcement was the tip of an iceberg built of personal difficulties and business maneuverings. But there is also a sense in which Bowie’s retirement announcement was integral to the concept of rock performance he developed during his engagement with the musical subgenre of glam rock, of which his performances as Ziggy Stardust were the apotheosis.” (Auslander 2006b: 70–71)



2006a: 107). A great part of the inspiration for Bowie's early projects came from vaudeville and variety show acts such as Anthony Newley, as well as from Lindsay Kemp's experimental theatre performances, in whose company Bowie participated in the late '60s, occasionally taking singing parts and also performing himself as a dancer and mime (ibid, 107-110).

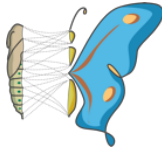
By the time he started working on *Ziggy Stardust* he had identified himself with the theatrical culture to such an extent that he would declare that theater and mime were just as much a part of his artistic self as music was. At times he would even concede theatre the prominent part: 'I feel like an actor when I'm on stage, rather than a rock artist' (in a 1972 interview, quoted via Auslander 2006a: 109). Bowie took a marked actorly stance in his early performances (and after that, throughout his career, although in milder forms), a trait that set him apart from the mainstream rock culture of the '50s and '60s. As Philip Auslander noted:

If Marc Bolan brought an implicitly theatrical sensibility to bear on the performance of rock music, David Bowie sought explicitly to perform rock *as theatre*. [...] Bowie not only envisioned the rock concert as a staged, costumed, and choreographed theatrical performance, he understood his own performing and his relationship to his audience in actorly terms rather than the communitarian terms that defined performance for psychedelic rockers. (Auslander 2006a: 106 - italics in original)

Naturally, a lot of the skills he acquired in his years as an actor went into his impersonation of Ziggy Stardust. Everything about Ziggy involved performance: his identity, the story, the songs, his gender - are all role-playing; the fact that Ziggy was an alien, and that therefore there were virtually no limits as to what he can be or do, enabled Bowie to create his identity "in such a way that it was clearly revealed *as a performance* for which there was no underlying referent" (Auslander 2006b: 74). Likewise, the often ludicrous combining of pantomime with elements of Kabuki theatre, heavy make-up, outrageous costumes and affected body poses has the quality to emphasize the artifice of his act or, as Shelton Waldrep put it, to draw attention on "that he is in fact performing a performance: that, as in Japanese drama especially, what one is seeing is to be thought of not as real but as staged and artificial - that is, as a performance to be deconstructed" (Waldrep 2004: 111).

It could be argued that there is an implicit criticism (although an ironical-benevolent, rather than an incisive one) in this type of "deconstructable" music performance and some critics felt that "Bowie's conscious construction of an alien rock star was certainly meant to shed light on the artificiality of rock in general" (McLeod 2003: 341). He would later recall: "I packaged a totally credible plastic rock star - much better than any sort of Monkees fabrication. My plastic rocker was much more plastic than anybody's" (quoted via 5years.com).

Largely based on the 'rise and fall' stories of Vince Taylor, Syd Barrett and Iggy Pop, Ziggy is at once a synthetic (one could say 'archetypal') exponent and a caricature of the ultimate rock'n'roll star. In either case, the bold, strident features of the prefabricated rocker served to underline the conventionality of his status, to



expose and acknowledge the mask for what it is.¹² Moreover, if a performer's stage persona is nothing but that – a persona, a mask – why would one settle for one mask or one role only and not undertake a variety of roles?

Ziggy, rather than Bowie, became the actor who impersonated the characters delineated in the songs, yet Ziggy was also a fictional entity enacted by Bowie. Revealed on stage, the “real person” who portrayed the characters in the recordings turned out not to be a real person at all. Just to make matters more complex, Ziggy was himself a character from one of Bowie's songs, meaning that Ziggy was sometimes singing about himself. (Auslander 2006a: 120)

It was this actorly versatility that ultimately built up and sustained the Ziggy Stardust performances' special world of make-believe.

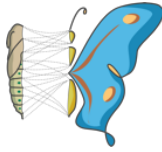
Downplaying the fantasy: alleged schizophrenia and “rock'n'roll suicide”

With Bowie's alleged schizophrenic-like psychosis, it would look as if the ironical act he had so cleverly contrived had taken an ironical twist itself. Already towards the end of 1972, he would make declarations such as these: “I'm not what I'm supposed to be. What are people buying? I adopted Ziggy onstage and now I feel more and more like this monster and less and less like David Bowie.” (quoted via 5years.com). Taken at face value, these words testify to a gradual – and improper, with regard to the initial aims – overturn of ontological status. Provided that his self-fashioning as Ziggy had lost its intentional aspect, “I'm not what I'm supposed to be” here reads “I'm not acting anymore”. Obviously, this overturn describes a path opposite to the one outlined by Eco¹³: once the intentionality of acting is lost, the character – and with it, everything constituting the act – becomes referentially transparent again. In Peircean terms, this could be described as a case of Thirdness slipping back into Secondness: once the mediating factor of role-playing is suspended, the symbolic connection between the performer and the character falls back (literally recedes) to a relation of contiguity. As Bowie sinks into his character, he goes from *interpreting* Ziggy (Thirdness) to *being* him (Secondness)¹⁴.

¹² Auslander observed that “neither Bolan nor Bowie was content simply to perform the role of a rock star – both also pointed self-consciously to the conventionality of that role” (Auslander 2006a: 112)

¹³ Eco (1979: 115): “Because of the first performative act [of the actor saying “I am acting” – *A.-R.M.*], everything following it becomes referentially opaque. Through the decision of the performer (“I am another man”) we enter the possible world of performance, a world of lies in which we are entitled to celebrate the suspension of disbelief.”

¹⁴ See de Waal 2001: 17–19 and also Susan Petrilli's entries on Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness in *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics*, 2010: 217 – 218, 316 – 317, and 343 – 345, respectively.



In 1993, he would recall how an initial halving (two separate entities, the actor and the character, coupled through the third element of role-playing) became an eventual fusing:

It was so much easier for me to live within the character, along with the help of some of the chemical substances at the time. It became easier and easier for me to blur the lines between reality and the blessed creature that I'd created – my doppelgänger. I wasn't getting rid of him at all; in fact, I was joining forces with him. The doppelgänger and myself were starting to become one and the same person. Then you start on this trail of psychological destruction and you become what's called a drug casualty at the end of it.' (quoted via Jarnow 2008: 489)

Regardless of what caused it, the fusing of mask and actor has a hindering effect on the performance: with the loss of Thirdness there follows an implicit destabilisation of those parameters that define a performance, most importantly stage-space and stage-time (Pavis 2003: 153–154, 157–159). Because Ziggy is a rock star, albeit an alien one, there is no real 'stage-space', for where else would a rock star perform, if not on a stage? And if he exists 'for real' – in Bowie's and in some people's minds¹⁵ – appearing as such at interviews and even in every-day life, then there is no 'stage-time' either, for there can be no ontological ruptures in one and the same person's life continuum¹⁶. As the character takes over the performer, likewise, and in a direct proportion, the imaginary space-time takes over the concrete space-time¹⁷.

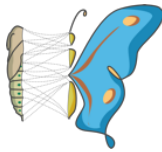
But then again, this story of self-mystification is not as clear and straightforward as Bowie's words might have made it look – and not only because his split-personality delusion seems to have disappeared as soon as he moved on to perform another act. In fact, rumors about him being delusional and even suicidal after the success of Ziggy Stardust were hardly ever taken at face value and generally hovered over those years more like an urban legend. While it is not impossible for Bowie to have been genuinely concerned about his mental health at the time – he has a family history of schizophrenia and many of the songs he composed between 1970 and 1973 deal with madness and loss or distortion of identity¹⁸ – there are, nevertheless, many indications suggesting that whatever happened cannot be entirely relegated to the realm of psychology.

¹⁵ The 5years.com "memorial" site has a compilation of such fan stories; one of them reads: "Ziggy was shrouded in mystery. He was definitely from the cosmos; androgynous, surreal and seductive, perfect porcelain skin, unearthly mismatched eyes with a foreign, piercing stare. It was impossible to discern if he was for real, or if this was an impeccable performance. We saw this on a black & white TV, yet it was still utterly compelling. We had found our ultimate icon, and there he was announcing his final performance. Our devastation mounted."

¹⁶ Bowie: "Nowadays there is really no difference between my personal life and anything I do on stage. I'm very rarely David Jones any more. I think I've forgotten who David Jones is." (in an 1972 interview – quoted via 5years.com).

¹⁷ For the conceptual discrimination between concrete and imaginary time-space, see Pavis 2003: 14. Pavis builds upon Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope.

¹⁸ Notable examples include *Bewlay Brothers*, *All the Madmen*, *Width of a Circle*, *The Man Who Sold the World*, and *Aladdin Sane*.



For one, the story of a rock star going mad at the height of his success is strangely consistent with the album's narrative; so is the Messianic craze surrounding his persona and the story's eventual denouement in – actual or symbolic – death. Seen from this perspective, what appears to be the downplaying of the performance-as-performance might prove to be its finishing touch, its, so to say, third act; or, to resort again to the Peircean scheme, a special case of Thirdness simulating Secondness.

It is true, on the other hand, that schizophrenia or schizophrenic-like psychosis is characterised precisely by some form of identity disorder, depression and paranoid manifestations. However, the most interesting fact is that none of these two alternatives (performed *vs.* genuine, conventional *vs.* natural) is either fully convincible, or completely unlikely. This, in a way, very Wildean dilemma of art imitating life *vs.* life imitating art managed to create an unrelenting ambivalence tingeing both realms of life and art, and it is just this ambivalence that has a distinctive semiotic “flavor”.

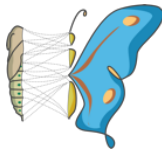
It could be argued that, in a way, Ziggy-the-character dies – vicariously or otherwise – with each performance; to give a single example, each time the single *Ziggy Stardust* was sang during a performance, the lyrics would repeat “Making love with his ego/ Ziggy sucked up into his mind/ Like a leper Messiah/ When the kids had killed the man I had to break up the band”. As some of Bowie's statements would make us believe, the character's grim destiny came to be internalised by the performer, or, at any rate, had an ominous bearing on his psyche:

I had a sort of a strange psychosomatic death wish thing because I was so lost in Ziggy and schizophrenia. It was his own personality being unable to cope with the circumstances he found himself in, which is being an almighty prophet-like superstar rocker. He found he didn't know what to do once he got it. It's an archetype really – the definitive rock'n'roll star. It often happens.' (Bowie 1974 – quoted via 5years.com)

Yet, already from the second sentence, he switches from the first to the third person, carrying on the play of shifting identities and pushing his persona even farther away from himself, back into the realm of archetypes, only to end, bluntly, in an impersonal and objective tone: “It often happens”.¹⁹

It could be argued that this type of passage from the first to the third person in his statements faithfully mirrors the changing of masks in Bowie's songs and thus reveals an integral part of his manner of storytelling. As Philip Auslander observed with regard to the whimsical quality of Bowie's impersonations from his early '70s albums and videos, “[s]elf-expression and critical commentary both require a defined and stable position from which to speak: Bowie provides no such position” (Auslander 2006a: 111). Just like the studio material that serves, *mutatis mutandis*, as

¹⁹ It is worthy of notice that two of the people on whom Ziggy Stardust was based, Vince Taylor and Syd Barrett, were diagnosed with schizophrenia and lived the rest of their post-fame life in almost complete reclusion.



its textual basis, every Ziggy Stardust performance is a frame narrative containing the accounts of different characters (those of the narrator, of fans, of the band's members and that of Ziggy himself); at the same time, every performance is, at once, a narrating of the plot and a part of the actual unfolding of the plot – again, just like in a frame narrative.

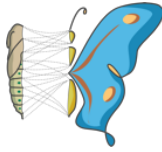
The tour is a concatenated series of episodes forming the story of Ziggy Stardust, while each episode is a narrative complete in itself. It remains ambiguous if the individual performances-as-narratives are to be viewed as prophecies of what is going to happen or as 'here-and-now' happenings, and, if so, as a sort of small-scale consummations of the greater story or rehearsal for it. The looseness of the show's make-up, its open-endedness, as Bowie put it, which is nothing but the open-endedness of his leading character²⁰, served to maintain such ambivalences. The closest theatrical analogy I can think of is Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine* (1977), a play in which actors step in and out of their characters in a series of loosely connected episodes (thus leaving the plot open to different and often playful cross-readings), amounting to what would essentially be a meditation on identity - on the identity of the actor, in particular. Still, for the analogy to be truly symmetrical it would mean that 'Hamlet' / the actor playing Hamlet should continue his split-identity dilemma also offstage long enough, say for two or three theatrical seasons, and maybe even give interviews to the press about his puzzling condition every now and then.

However, the 'space oddity' did eventually come to an end. The story is "told"/sang on stage and carried further offstage, in potentially endless series, but Ziggy actually "dies", as a character, in one last show at Hammersmith Odeon. Bowie singing *My Death* exclusively for the retirement concert is a sort of musical speech act²¹: the semantic content of the song, otherwise unrelated to the rest of the original musical material (it is an English cover of Jacques Brel's *La mort* of 1959) was in this way appropriated by the Ziggy Stardust act and readjusted as a part of the finale. Here again is another example of how the character, almost by itself, has the power to structure an entire performance and even to incorporate and semantically alter extraneous texts.

It is quite interesting – and relevant for the present talk about how a powerful and charismatic character can sometimes seem to take on a life of its own – that the sole viewing of the Hammersmith Odeon recording does not give the true measure of the Ziggy Stardust phenomenon, nor is it able to reveal the proportions that his

²⁰ Bowie: "I think that probably the best thing I did with Ziggy was to leave him open-ended. It wasn't a specific story, there were specific incidents within the story but it wasn't as roundly written as a usual narrative is. The only trouble with kind of copying somebody that's really well known is that you know all of the facts about them so you can't actually be that person but because Ziggy was kind of an empty vessel you could put an awful lot of yourself into being your own version of Ziggy." (in a 2000 interview – quoted via 5years.com).

²¹ London (1996: 49) argued that "as a result of our enculturated belief that music is a kind of language, we can and often do treat music as a linguistic phenomenon" and that therefore it is legitimate to speak of performing musical utterances as a special kind of speech acts.



legend took in the rock'n'roll imaginary. One spectator's testimony registered on the 5years.com "memorial" site reports that the desperation following Ziggy's "death" culminated into a full-blown orgy in the theatre house – an account which, to all appearances, is a matter of fiction. But the text that best captures the symbolic implications of the retirement concert is Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), the story of which is built upon the mystery surrounding the disappearance of glam rock star Brian Slade (played by Jonathan Rhys Meyers) after the tremendous success of his performances as the alien hero Maxwell Demon. Shrill and somewhat pretentious, *Velvet Goldmine* is, in many ways, the perfect fan fiction: Haynes was quick to pick up on the Wildean overtones of Ziggy's (Bowie's) story and even went so far as to compensate in the film's narrative for what Ziggy's performances and press interviews left understated ('open-ended') and, consequently, entirely up to fans' imagination. Perhaps the most pertinent example of such fictional compensation is the shooting hoax scene²², which, in all probability, was contrived as a more spectacular (i.e., proper) consummation of the rather anticlimactic statement that ended the Hammersmith Odeon show²³ and, with it, Ziggy's career.

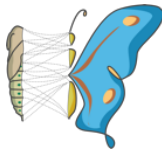
Concluding remarks

Ziggy Stardust created a phenomenon that the music/star-system world has witnessed more and more since Bowie's pioneering act (most recently and arguably most blatantly in Lady Gaga's case) and that could be resumed as follows: *the performer is the performance*. This equation brings with it a number of very important consequences (e.g., the distortion of the performance stage-time and the blurring of the boundary between the stage-space and concrete space). Once started, a performance of this type cannot be downplayed, for every gesture, even – or all the more – if it's carried out offstage, will bear a semiotic ambivalence (natural vs. conventional) and can ultimately be inscribed in the performance's order. The actor and the character, the artist and the artwork, fuse so completely that there is virtually no end to the performance, unless the performer himself is in one way or another suppressed, which is the only logical end.

In Bowie's case, another consequence can be said to be the creating of a fully-fledged character that eventually took on a life of his own in the rock imaginary. It was, without a doubt, a conscious move on the part of Bowie and Mick Rock to title the thirty-year Ziggy Stardust anniversary book in the manner of a conventional biography: *Moonage Daydream: The Life and Times of Ziggy Stardust* (2002). Unlike Elvis or Michael Jackson impersonators, Ziggy impersonators are not impersonating

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ge7RKvi2Cp0>

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CD1nzOeS6U0>



David Bowie, but Ziggy Stardust himself. It is not uncommon to find posts reading “RIP Ziggy Stardust” on YouTube, under Ziggy-era videos, and especially under scenes from the retirement concert. Ziggy’s status as a fictional all-round character is still unparalleled in rock’n’roll history and still somewhat exotic with regard to rock culture in general. Guitarist Trevor Bolder captured this aspect well when he observed that Ziggy was always “a bit like a cartoon character” (quoted via 5years.com); indeed, Ziggy belongs more to the world of Zorro and Spiderman than to that of, say, Lou Reed or John Lennon. He stands in that world freely on his own two fictional feet.

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