

3 Culminating Sounds and (En)visions

Ashes to Ashes and the case for Pierrot

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I'm Pierrot. I'm Everyman. What I'm doing is theatre, and only theatre [...] What you see on stage isn't sinister. It's pure clown. I'm using myself as a canvas and trying to paint the truth of our time on it. The white face, the baggy pants—they're Pierrot, the eternal clown putting over the great sadness of 1976.

(Bowie cited in Rook, 1976)

INTRODUCTION

In October 2013 David Bowie released a self-directed homemade video for the James Murphy remix of his latest single 'Love is Lost' using two mannequins from the David Bowie Archive. Shot over one week and commencing with the 'real' David Bowie repeatedly washing his hands, the video's central character is that of a Pierrot clown dressed in black. In the video's relatively simple storyline Pierrot is watched over by the 'real' David Bowie and by another mannequin who closely resembles the Thin White Duke. Devoid of any make-up, David Bowie's face is superimposed on Pierrot's.

Many readings could undoubtedly be made of this video. The merging of Bowie and Pierrot; the resurrection of the sinister looking Thin White Duke; the frightened, vulnerable clown dressed in funeral black; Pierrot's feet tap-dancing in the expectation of a visit from Columbine; the skeletal shadows and the obsessive washing of hands all suggest potentially fruitful starting points for analysis and discussion. For us however, the video serves as a further reminder of the recurrence of the figure of Pierrot in Bowie's lifelong work. Bowie's many connections with this sad or insolent clown are well documented. These include his performances in and songwriting for the Lindsay Kemp production of *Pierrot in Turquoise* (1967), dressing as Pierrot in a performance of *The Man Who Sold the World* with the late Klaus Nomi in 1979 (Hawkins, 2009: 61) and his numerous references to Pierrot in media interviews, including this one, which we take as a point of departure, not as a definitive statement:

What the music says may be serious, [...] but as a medium it should not be questioned, analysed or taken too seriously. I think it should

be tarted up, made into a prostitute, a parody of itself. It should be the clown, the Pierrot medium. The music is the mask the message wears—music is the Pierrot and I, the performer, am the message.

(Bowie cited in Mendelssohn, 1971)

Bowie's most extensive use of Pierrot is of course to be seen in the promotional video for his 1980 single 'Ashes to Ashes' and it is to this song and video we turn in this chapter. Various interpretations have been offered: as a requiem or an epitaph for Bowie's past incarnations; as a 1980s nursery rhyme; as an updated account of 'Space Oddity's' Major Tom; or as a thinly-veiled account of Bowie's many trials and tribulations with both the music industry and drug addiction, 'Ashes to Ashes' remains one of David Bowie's most critically acclaimed, popular and commercially successful songs. The song and its accompanying video have been the subject of much discussion online,¹ in the many biographies and compendia published on David Bowie (see Pegg, 2004; Buckley, 2000 & 2004) and in critical academic literature including a musicological analysis by Moore (1995) of the use of the 'Flattened 7th' in 'Ashes to Ashes', a queer reading of Bowie's 'Ashes to Ashes' performance by Hawkins (2009) and a comparative analysis of Bowie and Schoenberg's use of the Pierrot mask by Carpenter (2010).

In this chapter we focus on 'Ashes to Ashes' and offer a critical reading of both the song and the video. Instead of seeing Bowie as Pierrot merely engaging in a sort of 'tidying-up' exercise, we read the song as being as much about Bowie's future as his past. The spectre of Pierrot is one that appears and reappears in Bowie's oeuvre as a figure of continuity, in key moments of Bowie's career, none more so than in 'Ashes to Ashes'. We begin this chapter with a brief introduction to 'Ashes to Ashes', honing in on the figure of Pierrot. This is followed by a discussion of the history and significance of the Pierrot figure, establishing Bowie's connection with Pierrot and with various musical-dramatic forms more broadly, particularly from the early twentieth century. 'Ashes to Ashes' is then examined in detail and we offer a close critical reading of both the promotional video (our account of which includes some new material in terms of explaining its provenance) and the song, maintaining Pierrot and the various historical allusions at the centre. We conclude by reasserting the importance of musical drama and of the Pierrot figure not just in terms of understanding 'Ashes to Ashes' but also David Bowie's broader career.

PEOPLE ARE TURNING TO GOLD: A BRIEF HISTORY OF 'ASHES TO ASHES'

The song 'Ashes to Ashes' was co-produced by David Bowie and Tony Visconti in 1980. Originally entitled 'People Are Turning to Gold', the demo was recorded without lyrics in the Powerhouse Recording Studios (New York) in February. Bowie requested additional time to complete this and other songs on what was to become his *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* album. In April he recorded the song which he had, by now, re-titled

‘Ashes to Ashes’ at Visconti’s Good Earth Studios (London). While we will discuss the structure of the song in more detail later in this chapter, it is worth noting at this juncture that it was originally intended to use a Wurlitzer Organ in its recording as if to underscore its carnivalesque aspect.²

Bowie has offered a number of possible explanations for what the song was intended to be about. These include updating us on the fate of Major Tom, a marked sense of disillusionment with the promise of technology (and the ‘Space Race’ in particular) as well as the proposition that it represented a kind of nursery rhyme. In an interview in 1980 he summarised ‘Ashes to Ashes’ as follows: “It really is an ode to childhood, if you like, a popular nursery rhyme. It’s about spacemen becoming junkies ... (laughs)” (Bowie cited in MacKinnon, 1980: 37). The song has also been read as a not too thinly veiled autobiography of Bowie’s 1970s and it has been noted that the album from which it came—*Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*—was in itself seen as a kind of purge for Bowie. Bowie explains ‘Ashes to Ashes’ further in an interview which RCA Records released as a promotional device for *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*.

When I was thinking of how I was going to place [...] Major Tom in [...] what would be the complete disillusion with the [...] great dream that was being propounded when they shot him into space [...] And we left him there and now we come to him 10 years later on we find the whole thing has soured because there was no reason for putting him up there [...] so the most disastrous thing I could think of is that he finds solace in only some kind of heroin type drug [...] cosmic space itself was feeding him with an addiction and he wants now to return to the womb from whence he came.

(Bowie, 1980)

‘Ashes to Ashes’ was the first song to be released as a single from *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*. Pierrot was the persona adopted by Bowie for the album’s artwork and all its associated promotional materials.³ ‘Ashes to Ashes’ was a resounding critical and commercial success, reaching number one in the UK singles charts.⁴ Although Pierrot is not specifically referred to in the song, all three of the record sleeves used to promote the song featured Bowie dressed as the clown. As if to reinforce the Pierrot motif further, the first 100,000 pressings of the single included a sheet of one of four sets of stamps⁵ with Bowie styled as Pierrot.⁶

THE BOWIE-PIERROT COMPLEX

The wonder of mimesis lies in the copy drawing on the character and power of the original to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and power.

(Taussig, 1993: xiii)

Who is Pierrot and why would David Bowie decide to activate and maintain him as a stock figure in his performances and representations? As well as exploring the historical figure of Pierrot who, for over four centuries, has been part of the dramatic arts across Europe, we look at his changing role as an archetype, a modulating persona, a dramatic convention and a powerful representation of the human condition (Storey, 1978; Youens, 1984). We follow this with a closer examination of Pierrot in the early twentieth century, in particular as found in Arnold Schoenberg's expressionist piece *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912). This is an era with which, we surmise, David Bowie was quite familiar, potentially as a result of personal research into facets of German culture and politics during time spent in Berlin but also building upon exposure to expressionist art in his early days as a student. We then comment on one of Bowie's earliest TV roles in *Pierrot in Turquoise*, which we argue has been seminal in shaping Bowie from the outset, placing the dramatic arts right at the centre of his expressivity and installing Pierrot as a recurring theme or leitmotif across his career.

Past Pierrots

Pierrot-type characters have been presented in various forms and guises across four centuries of European drama, but it is generally agreed that Pierrot cohered into a recognizable figure from the *commedia dell'arte* in sixteenth-century Italy, emerging in dramatic forms across the continent, from Italy to Spain, France to England and beyond (see Storey, 1978; Behr et al., 1993). The hallmark of *Commedia*, an improvised dramatic form, was a self-conscious theatricality, full of exaggeration and artifice. This early manifestation of Pierrot or 'Little Peter' was in the form of a quick and capricious buffoon who, over time, began to take on greater complexity and vulnerability during the eighteenth century, a beautiful if often lost soul, or sometimes a vessel for multiple characters (Storey, 1978: 3). This was the period in which Pierrot's *Commedia* white costume and white-faced appearance became firmly established (Kurth, 2010). Pierrot gradually took on a decidedly more dandified persona amongst the nineteenth-century Romantics (Hawkins, 2009). In England, Pierrot was part of Harlequinade—a slapstick version of the *Commedia* featuring Harlequin and Pierrot as the two principal figures. Pierrot the clown was, for many, most associated with pantomime form. A young David Bowie encountered such dramatic forms, including mime, in his training with choreographer Lindsay Kemp in the late sixties⁷ and soon embodied, playing the role of Cloud in *Pierrot in Turquoise* in 1967. However, before discussing that formative experience for Bowie, it is also worth considering how the Pierrot character developed new facets and greater psychological depth at the turn of the twentieth century. This Pierrot took on a darker side, exerting a huge influence on Western modernism, particularly from 1890 to 1930 (Green & Swan, 1993). Many avant-garde writers, painters

and composers mobilised this darker version in their works, particularly those from the Expressionist cadre.⁸ In light of this, perhaps it is not surprising that in his own era, Bowie would also turn to the powerful figure of Pierrot to energe his creative output.

Moonstruck

One canonical work from that era is the melodrama by composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) entitled *Pierrot Lunaire*, which premiered in Berlin's Choralion-Sall in 1912. *Pierrot of the Moon* contrasted to its sunny *commedia dell'arte* progenitors as Schoenberg crafted “a darker and more sinister Pierrot” for that time (Linder, 2012).⁹ This work, with its new, taut atonal¹⁰ sounds, dramatic and textured ensemble, and varied vocal techniques explored new depths in the psyche, deploying parody and ironic detachment to marshal excessive expressionistic tendencies. Schoenberg was seen as a transformative figure in the music world (Sandford, 1996; Brinkmann, 1997), someone who moved away from the excesses of nineteenth-century Romanticism, with its lush orchestration and sentimentality, and into, at least in this piece, the macabre, which is carefully and deliberately expressed at a distance by the composer (Carpenter, 2010).

Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* is based on a series of poems by Albert Giraud (1860–1929), first published in 1884, and featuring a complex figure shifting between hero and fool (Marsh, 2007; Richter, 2001). In this setting, Schoenberg presents Pierrot as the centrepiece of a melodrama—high art presented as cabaret. Within its taut and dramatic soundscape, song and speech blur, male roles are sung by a woman and the subject position vacillates between first and third person, all tricks familiar to the Bowie oeuvre. One song from the cycle, ‘Der Kranke Mond (the Sick Moon)’ features the verse “you nocturnal death-sick moon / there on the sky's black pillow / your gaze / gross with fever / enchants me like an alien melody”. One wonders if Major Tom of ‘Ashes to Ashes’ is in fact simply a moonstruck Pierrot at an “all time low”, nocturnally drugged and in a nightmare from which he can't awaken.

It is more than possible Schoenberg's *Pierrot* exerted considerable influence on Bowie, not least because of the character's depraved, moonstruck delirium and his complex psyche, all supremely controlled in this tightly woven, avant-garde musical form. Bowie would most likely have studied Expressionist painters as a young man and a self-portrait of Bowie from around 1980 bears striking resemblance to a self-portrait by Schoenberg.¹¹ As Murray has pointed out, Bowie's own paintings and drawings seemed to be specifically influenced by *Die Brücke*, a key German Expressionist group with which Schoenberg had ties (Murray, 2013).¹² However inspiring *Pierrot of the Moon* may have been for Bowie, the Pierrot with whom he had the most experience was the *commedia dell'arte*-type figure of Cloud in *Pierrot in Turquoise*.

Threepenny Pierrot

Pierrot in Turquoise was a theatre creation of British choreographer, actor and mime artist Lindsay Kemp who was a very influential figure in Bowie's early career. Starring alongside Kemp as Pierrot, Bowie played the character of Cloud and composed and performed the musical numbers for the show, including 'Threepenny Pierrot', 'Columbine', and 'The Mirror', which he wrote anew and which debuted in Oxford in December 1967. The theatre piece was subsequently broadcast in 1970, having been recorded by Scottish television in 1969.

In his role as Cloud and as song performer, Bowie was a troubadour, a narrator and the framing device for the action, supplementing the mime and offering commentary on the emotional state of the characters and audience. The plot was simple: Pierrot attempts to win the love of Columbine, but when she 'betrays' him with Harlequin, Pierrot murders her (hence 'The Looking Glass Murders').¹³ Even though he did not play Pierrot, Bowie's exposure to the character meant that Pierrot was deeply implicated in Bowie's own biography, particularly as evidenced by his professional and personal relationships with the cast and crew of *Pierrot in Turquoise*. In what could only be interpreted as a case of life imitating art, during that period Bowie's relationship with Kemp (Pierrot) and with the costume designer Natasha Korniloff created a Pierrot-Columbine-Harlequin love triangle reminiscent of many older *commedia dell'arte* scenarios (on finding out of the betrayal, Kemp apparently slit his wrists and these wounds later reopened during a performance, at which point the audience responded enthusiastically to the exceptional realism of the play).¹⁴

The songs themselves look both back and forward stylistically—'Columbine' and 'The Mirror' in particular offering a glimpse of the future with their shimmering guitar figurations and harmonic progressions, and 'Threepenny Pierrot' is pure homage to musical theatre with its oom-pah piano vamping configurations and simple song construction that narrates the appeal of Pierrot for his audiences: 'Thre'penny Pierrot / we love you / Thre'penny Pierrot loves us too / Pockets of gladness, gaytime eyes / comical hero Thre'penny Pierrot'.¹⁵

As a stock character with historical longevity and cultural capital, Pierrot was the consummate 'rockstar' of each era in which this character found himself, from early *commedia dell'arte* right through to the twentieth century, where many actors and mimes literally became Pierrot heroes as a result of their commanding portrayals of the character. Bowie simply did the same by taking on this celebrated form and by copper-fastening the connection between mime (with its posing and exaggeration) and rock 'n' roll performance. Pierrot may have been a lovelorn fool but the fool is paradigm for the artist, especially one who takes risks as Schoenberg did and as Bowie did, particularly in 'Ashes to Ashes'. But before performing an analysis of that video and song, there is one more crucial connection to be made with early twentieth-century musical theatre which allows us to consider the song and video as a pop opera or music drama for the modern MTV era.

THE RISE AND FALL ...

There were two key events before and after the release of 'Ashes to Ashes' in 1980 that are critical to performing contextual analysis of the song. The first relates to the 1978 release of an acoustic version of 'Space Oddity'¹⁶ as the B-side of 'Alabama Song', and the second is concerned with the *Baal* EP from the BBC TV production of the same title in 1981. These two recordings in particular evidence Bowie's connection with the dramatic work of Berthold Brecht (1896–1956) and his musical partner Kurt Weill (1900–1950). 'Alabama Song' is from Brecht and Weill's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany* (1930), and the *Baal* EP features five songs from Brecht's 1918 play, written before his partnership with Weill. The EP was entitled *David Bowie in Berthold Brecht's Baal*, recorded in 1981 and released by RCA in 1982. Like Schoenberg, Brecht and Weill captured a particular aesthetic in early twentieth-century Germany, the echoes and traces of which can be found in the style and content of 'Ashes to Ashes'. Like Schoenberg, Brecht's plays and Weill's music engaged with themes of darkness and interiority, but their work recognised alienation in a more socially grounded way and they used hybrid, Surrealist techniques to explore their ideas.¹⁷ *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany* is all about man's love of wealth, particularly gold, and how he is ultimately doomed (it is worth reiterating that 'Ashes to Ashes' originally bore the title 'People are turning to Gold').¹⁸ A further connection between Bowie, Brecht and Weill comes in the form of *Pierrot in Turquoise* just discussed. It was also known as 'Threepenny Pierrot' after one of the songs Bowie wrote for the TV programme. This in turn may be an allusion to *The Threepenny Opera*¹⁹ (1928) by Brecht and Weill, itself an adaptation of *The Beggar's Opera*²⁰ (1728) by John Gay (1685–1732), raising the likely possibility that familiarity with the Brecht-Weill duo may well have preceded Bowie's Berlin days, as, probably, did Bowie's assumed awareness of Schoenberg's *Pierrot*.²¹

Tying Brecht and Weill to Schoenberg is important as the influence from these artists is evident in our analysis of 'Ashes to Ashes'. We begin with the video as a theatrical piece for the 1980s, saturated with Expressionist and Surrealist techniques, and culminate with an analysis of the song which focuses on the many allusions to older creative ideas and theatre forms. *Pierrot* is firmly kept at the centre, as the narrator and disciplining figure. *Pierrot* recasts Major Tom and other Bowie characters in a particular way, but also points to the future through a compelling musical and visual statement that speaks to the timelessness of art and to the universalism of human nature in flights of fantasy and of the subconscious.

Bulldozers, Bonfires, Black Seas and Pierrot: Creating the 'Ashes to Ashes' Video

The path-breaking promotional video for 'Ashes to Ashes' was co-directed by David Mallet²² and David Bowie. Shot over three days in Hastings and



Figure 3.1 David Bowie as Pierrot (1980). Image Reproduced by kind permission of the David Bowie Archive and V&A London.

Ewart Studios in Wandsworth, the video cost £35,000 to make²³ rendering it the most expensive rock music video for its time. The video was storyboarded by Bowie who was responsible for its overall concept and styling, with Mallet in charge of the treatments used. This is a crucial point as Bowie exerted absolute control but was open to improvise with any ideas and materials presented to him, a skill he had undoubtedly developed in theatre. Bowie and Mallet contributed specific ideas to the overall mix. The cards (mini-screens) held by Pierrot and others which facilitate the transition between individual scenes, for example, came from Bowie. The umbilical cord through which the spaceman (Major Tom) is connected to the Cosmos at the video's conclusion came from Mallet who was inspired by the 1958–59 BBC science fiction series *Quatermass and the Pit*.²⁴ He recalled:

With Bowie it's a genuine collaboration because he knows exactly what he wants. The discussion was: "I want to be a clown. I want

to be on the beach and I want some Modern Romantics with me.” Then I would say: “Wouldn’t it be great if the sky was black?” And he would say: “Yes, and we can have a burning brazier.” And I would say: “Then we can do the scene from Quatermass where you are plugged into a spaceship.” And he would say: “Great, and I can hang like this.” And I would say: “Yes, great, we can extend your veins out to the spaceship.

(Mallet, 2013)

The video’s overall ‘look’ was created by accident and *not* through the technique known as ‘solarisation’ as had been widely reported. In 1979 David Mallet was directing a video for the Hot Gossip song ‘Supernature’²⁵ in Hastings. By chance, he devised a way to darken the sky which he attributes to a peculiarity of the outside broadcasting van and video mixer being used on the day.²⁶ Some of ‘Ashes to Ashes’ sets (the padded cell and the astronaut strapped into his chair in the kitchen complete with nurse/kitchen-maid) had been previously seen on a television performance by Bowie (also directed by David Mallet) of ‘Space Oddity’²⁷ in late 1979. These were re-created to generate a series of flashbacks for viewers thus cementing the connection between both songs. The cast of ‘Ashes to Ashes’ drew upon a number of key figures from the New Romantic scene (specifically The Blitz Club) in London. They included Steve Strange²⁸ (Visage), Judith Frankland and Darla Jane Gilroy. In addition to the video’s carefully thought out storyboarding, at least one key scene came about by chance. While filming on the beach in Hastings it was discovered that there was a large bulldozer being used in a nearby quarry and Bowie requested that it be used in the film to signify “oncoming violence”. Bowie would later describe the video as being ‘surreal’ in reference to the decision to include a woman who resembled his mother (Peggy Jones *nee* Byrnes) in the storyline (Bowie, 1993). Furthermore, he makes specific reference to the use of “... the clown costume [...] based upon a *Commedia Del Arte* figure—Pierrot—of an Italian comedy [...] Renaissance Comedy” (Bowie, 1993). The song may ostensibly have been about Major Tom, but the video is dominated by the Pierrot figure.

Spacemen, Madmen and Drowning Clowns: Reading the ‘Ashes to Ashes’ Video

In its closing frames a brooding Major Tom is suspended mid-air in his spaceship/womb. As viewers, we bear witness to the spaceman’s dream sequence/nightmare or hallucinations which are told to us through a series of interlinked vignettes beginning with vague shots of two figures preparing a funeral pyre on a beach. The video is an example *par excellence* of the influence of Expressionism, together with Surrealism,²⁹ within popular culture and is testament to the influence of these movements on David Bowie.

The storyline's apparent lack of logic, its placing of characters in seemingly incongruent settings and its blend of vivid colouring and black and white imagery all point to these influences.

Although the song's lyrics are directly concerned with 'Space Oddity's' central protagonist Major Tom, the dominant figure in this groundbreaking video is in fact Pierrot.³⁰ It is Pierrot who orchestrates scene changes in this melodrama. It is Pierrot who reports on the fate of Major Tom. It is Pierrot's narrative which is interspersed with images of a funeral procession; of Major Tom in two separate settings (strapped into his space-man's chair in the 'exploding' kitchen and hooked up to the Cosmos in a spaceship/womb) and a man incarcerated in a padded cell. The clown, replete with Ziggy-influenced stripe, is centrally positioned in the group bulldozer shots, he is the one who is being lectured at and he is the one who is ultimately consumed/drowned by the darkened sea. A range of secondary characters also feature: the New Romantics dressed in ecclesiastical garb (referred to as 'monks' by Bowie), an elderly mother figure, a press photographer and a nurse/kitchen maid. The inclusion of the man in the padded cell references Bowie's earlier concerns with impending madness.³¹ It is also directly tied to the song's reference to auditory hallucinations which are a common symptom of schizophrenia/psychosis. This is achieved through Bowie repeating the song's lyrics through spoken voice underneath the vocals.

The presence of certain images (the bulldozer, the dove being set free by Pierrot, the bonfire and Pierrot being photographed) all invite rich interpretative possibilities. The powerful bulldozer, the funeral pyre, the unleashing of the dove all point to a ritual cleansing. Bowie has talked about the bulldozer symbolising 'oncoming violence'; Columbine (from *Pierrot in Turquoise* discussed earlier in this chapter) has previously been represented by a dove. In setting the dove free, Pierrot is conceding that Columbine is in love with Harlequin. The bonfire represents a funeral pyre being readied to dispose of a corpse (or corpses). Taken together, these specific images may be understood as a sweeping away of the past.

The video's colouring is also of significance. Its radical mixing of garish hues and the blackening of the sky and sea also offer us many cues. Darkness and the colour black in particular signify danger, a sense of foreboding and ultimately death. The colour red signifies blood and the possibility of death through violence. Pierrot's white face can be read as having the pallor of the dead. Serving as Bowie's alter ego, Pierrot is used to exorcise old ghosts, to bury the dead and to pave the way to a new future. Pierrot is also that stock figure from over four hundred years of theatre who channels universal trials and tribulations, triumphs and defeats, and that specific modernist Pierrot who takes us into dangerous places in our psyche.

MODERNIST MELODRAMA: A MUSICAL ANALYSIS OF
'ASHES TO ASHES'³²

If the video of 'Ashes to Ashes' is a garish sequence of powerful visuals, the music operates to underscore this sense of not moving forward in a logical sequence but rather moving in circles, with no clear beginning and end. In performing this analysis, we draw upon musicological and contextual analytical techniques and approaches from Middleton (1990), Shuker (2001), Brackett (2000) and Hawkins (2009), and deliberately focus on the song structure, which we view as being constructed of different styles, conventions, and subject positions, being assembled in a particular kind of way that is replete with allusions to other art forms. Expanding on O'Leary's assessment of the song as a "vertical, organic, and deliberate mess",³³ we view it as a tightly structured composition, full of deliberate historical and structural allusions and crafted with technical sophistication, as Bowie has never really "done anything out of the blue". Certainly, one may agree that at face value 'Ashes to Ashes' seems "composed from old records, stitched together out of discarded rhythms and random tracks" but it is also clear that other sounds and style, from other musical influences, are operating here, all orchestrated by the master of ceremonies of this fantastic cabaret-video-and-song performance, Pierrot. One crucial influence is the Danny Kaye (1952) rendition of 'Inchworm' (written by Frank Loesser) for the movie *Hans Christian Anderson* which has been acknowledged by Bowie as an important influence on 'Ashes to Ashes'. In an interview in *Performing Songwriter* he states:

I loved it ('Inchworm') as a kid and it's stayed with me forever. I keep going back to it. You wouldn't believe the amount of my songs that have sort of spun off that one song. Not that you'd really recognize it. Something like 'Ashes to Ashes' wouldn't have happened if it hadn't have been for 'Inchworm.' There's a child's nursery rhyme element in it, and there's something so sad and mournful and poignant about it. It kept bringing me back to the feelings of those pure thoughts of sadness that you have as a child, and how they're so identifiable even when you're an adult. There's a connection that can be made between being a somewhat lost five-year old and feeling a little abandoned and having the same feeling when you're in your twenties. And it was that song that did that for me.

(Bowie cited in De Main, 2003)

In the first section, we look closely at the harmonic and metric structure of the song, particularly the opening riff (and closing coda) which sets up a kind of circular and discombobulating structure for the song. This is followed by a closer look at some of the recitative-like song line configurations throughout the song which are suggestive of other genres, of cabaret and

of expressionist songs featuring *Sprechstimme* techniques (speech-song). This brief look at some of the lyrics as they relate to the overall structure, particularly in terms of style and declamatory approach, is suggestive of conventions and universal thematic contents found frequently in both *com-media dell'arte* dramatic forms, as discussed earlier, and in terms of madness and interiority as associated with and performed in expressionistic works in particular, such as Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. In other words, we suggest that, as in our analysis of the video, the song is as much cabaret masquerading as lowbrow opera as it is a pop song concealing its debt to earlier genres.

Metrical and Harmonic Concerns

The key signature of 'Ashes to Ashes' is given as Ab major, though the song proper (i.e. when the lyrics enter "do you remember") begins on the home chord of Ab major, the very important introductory riff suggests the key of Bb minor.³⁴ There is an opening, memorable arpeggio figure beginning on the note of F and moving in the following sequence or F Bb C / C F / Bb Eb / F Bb C. In a time signature of 4/4 (four quarter notes in a measure), the notes fall on the beats highlighted thus: one and two and three and four and/, etc. Here is the full pattern of the first four-measure phrase, a standard unit of measurement in pop and folk songs.³⁵

Measure no.	1.	2.	3.	4.
Chord choice	<i>Bb min 7th</i>	<i>Ab maj</i>	<i>Eb min</i>	<i>Bb min 7</i>
Down/offbeats	<u>1</u> ± 2 + 3 + 4 +/ <u>1</u> + 2 ± 3 + 4 +/ <u>1</u> + 2 ± 3 + 4 +/ <u>1</u> ± <u>2</u> + 3 + 4 +/			
Notes	F Bb C...../ C.....F...../ Bb....Eb...../ F Bb C...../			

Figure 3.2 Opening musical riff of 'Ashes to Ashes'.

This is then further extended by two more measures (not a full four, as might be expected).³⁶ The first of these is empty, while the second has a fragment that is an echo of the materials found in measure 3:

5. Ab maj	6. Eb min
1 + 2 + 3 + 4 +/ <u>1</u> + 2 ± 3 + 4 +/	
...../ Bb...Eb...../	

Figure 3.3 Final two measures of opening instrumental riff of 'Ashes to Ashes'.

The first four-measure phrase with its two-measure extension is worthy of comment both in terms of harmonic/metric and syncopated properties and the manner in which tension is created by such harmonic and metric ambiguity. This riff functions as a mini overture, setting up the story of the song, and establishing a key motif that persists throughout the composition.

In terms of harmonic content, to start on Bb minor, the second on the scale of Ab major, is to start a little outside the hierarchy of tonal harmony that would easily lead back to the home chord of Ab (they do not have a

particularly strong harmonic relationship as chords, though they are far from alien). The opening Bb chord is further destabilised with the added seventh note which causes it to pivot, not quite allowing it to commit. The second chord, Ab, doesn't feel at all like a resolution or a coming home to chord I of the song (it's in the key of Ab major). The riff then moves onto the third chord, Eb minor. Eb major is chord V of Ab major, a strong relationship, but here the Eb is in a minor manifestation, so it really belongs more with the first chord of the riff, as an extension of that initial Bb minor. The fourth chord of this four-measure riff brings things back where we started, to Bb minor. The two-measure extension of empty space and then a repetition of the figure found in measure three, based on an Eb minor chord, sets us up to move from a minor version of chord V in Ab major, to the song proper in Ab. In order to fully appreciate what is happening in these initial four plus two measures, it is important to look at where the notes are falling in the melodic riff (see Figures 3.2 and 3.3). At the start of measure 1, the three notes fall on the downbeat (1), off-beat (+) and down beat (2) respectively, leaving the rest of the measure empty. Measures 2 and 3 have a down beat note followed by one off-beat, with lots of space and air, creating a strong syncopated feel. Measure 4 is a copy of measure 1, in part suggesting the riff is, in fact a three-measure phrase and one that is about to be repeated. But there is a rupture. There is an empty measure and then a reprise of measure 3. It is a kind of echo of the first three measures, thereby creating a three-against-four feel, disconcerting the listener as to his place in the phrase (rather than getting two four-measure phrases, we receive a truncated six-measure phrase that ambiguously lies between a 4+2 and a 3+3 construct). This resultant groove is an off-kilter one.

But the opening riff has a second, very important function. It is reprised between verses and crucially is repeated in a particular way at the song's end, something which disrupts the sense of time moving forward and suggests, rather, moving in circles, similar to the synchronous feel of a nursery rhyme, underpinned by the nah-nah-nah-type chanting of 'My mama says, to get things done, you better not mess with Major Tom' which reference an old nursery rhyme which warns: "My mother said / I never should / Play with the Gypsies in the wood" (Anonymous).³⁷ Bowie makes the connection to the persistence of that genre in 1980:

It's very much a 1980s nursery rhyme [...] and I think that 1980s nursery rhymes will have a lot to do with the 1880s 1890s nursery rhymes which were all rather horrid and had little boys with their ears being cut off.

(Bowie, 1980)

In each of these re-utterances of the rhyme, there is a slight change in where the 'start' of the riff aligns with the vocal line, and where it also ends before being repeated, creating a rather out-of-phase feel. As we have suggested in

our video analysis and in our broader understanding of the function of this song, the riff and its strategic structural deployment creates a feeling of both looking back but also looking forward, at being stuck in a groove and at being timeless. The fact it is delivered on a mediated instrument that, for all intents and purposes, hints to a kind of organ-grinder (an allusion to earlier dramatic theatre and street forms) but also to futuristic synthesizer sounds, doubly underpins this observation. This is the most memorable structure in the song and little wonder it should reappear so many years later in Murphy's mix of 'Love is Lost' which accompanied Bowie's homemade video featuring Pierrot. That clown and this riff are inextricably linked.

Keeping Off-Kilter: Structure, Style and Allusion

If the opening riff, which also functions as a bridge and a closing gesture, works in a particular way to create a sense of the off-kilter, the song proper seems to have another kind of form and function, though it remains connected to the groove of the opening riff. Some parts are quite typical, even predictable, such as the chorus melody line and rather straightforward harmonic progression of IV-V-I-vi-IV-V ... then leading back into the opening riff. This is the part where we can all sing along in unison, it would seem. But underneath that very classical kind of harmonic movement, there is still that off-beat edge.

IV	V
1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + / 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + /	
A-shes to A----shes/Funk ... to Fun-----key/	
I	vi
1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + / 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + /	
We knowMa-----jor Tom/-----'s a ju--un-----key .../	

Figure 3.4 The syncopated lyrics in the chorus of 'Ashes to Ashes' (count 'one and two and three and four and'—the syllable is aligned below each beat).

The melodic material is simple though, with "Ashes to ashes / funk to funky" sharing a three note motif moving down stepwise from Gb to F to E repeated across two measures. "We know Major Tom's a Junky" stretches across the same two bar structure, just starting a note above the original but with the same melodic movement of moving down stepwise, Ab to Gb to F (or sometimes you'll hear the backing vocals singing two notes below, in harmony with this line, i.e. F to E to D, more clearly). "Strung out on Heaven's high" is almost identical to the first phrase, moving Gb to F to E, and then the last four measures move slowly and laboriously to a guttural "all-time-low", landing on middle C, the lowest note in the range. This relationship between sounding out or representing mood and feeling through the use of melodic contour is a familiar convention in the world of music drama. So too is the use of a kind of falsetto, starting on the high Ab, in the verses of the

song. In these sections we also find repeated descending phrases, musically representing the fall of the protagonist, but this time the melodic materials are repeated three times before the end of the phrase runs into a kind of speech-song articulation, the conversational “oh no, don’t say it’s true” and “oh, no, not again”, light allusion to, perhaps, the dramatic *Sprechstimme*³⁸ technique used by Arnold Schoenberg discussed in earlier sections, but certainly also to more typical dramatic conventions. The tone is overwrought and exaggerated, gossipy even, just like how the clown would muse conspiratorially in a show, or how one might represent a conversation between two people or an interior exchange between two sides of one person, struggling perhaps, under the influence of drugs. In a later part of the verse from “the shrieking of nothing to ... I ain’t got no hair”, a melody line is still evident, but the flowing delivery of the words and syllabi is suggestive of an almost recitative-like approach, with rhythmic oscillations rubbing against the underpinning motor rhythm of the song. The harmonic movement here is very typical of the kinds of harmonic underpinning found in a more conventional operative recitative which is deployed not just to reveal the thoughts of the protagonist but more especially to move the action forward. In such a case, the underpinning harmony can also go through a rather dramatic sequence. Here, if the chords of this sequence are analysed and a probable melodic line extracted, it takes the shape of a semitonal descent, from Bb to A to Gb and so forth, a rather dramatic device that creates tension.

The song is one of three parts or acts, then—the opening riff or overture, the clearly melodically and harmonically defined chorus and the slightly wayward verses that move between conversational tones and recitative-like gestures, all of which hark back to older more declamatory forms of musical theatre. Finally, there is the coda, the nursery rhyme of “My mama said”, which also conjures the darker side of childhood, of scary monsters and super creeps, as it goes around in circles, a metric, harmonic and phrasing dissonance created between the closing rhyme and the opening riff which interweaves and ultimately consumes it, allowing the story to continue past the boundaries of the lyrics and the song itself.

CONCLUSION

The lyrical content and structure, and the associated imagery of the video of ‘Ashes to Ashes’ are all about performing interiority, of a conflicted or dream state, on subjects that are often taboo, tying ‘Ashes’, stylistically and contextually, to both expressionist (Schoenberg) and surrealist (Weill and Brecht) influences. With its Pierrot-dominated, soliloquy-like moments the effect is one of pure and utterly controlled performance, compelling the listener/viewer to engage with all aspects of this melodrama called ‘Ashes to Ashes’ which permitted Bowie to reassert his hegemonic position within the music industry. Little wonder that Pierrot should reappear in *The Next*

Day (2013) over forty years after Bowie first encountered Pierrot in mime and some thirty-two years after the release of 'Ashes to Ashes'. Pierrot is too compelling a figure to leave behind, with his rich historical and dramatic connotations, his obvious longevity and his patent efficacy; the perfect vehicle for engaging with the inner state of the artist (in this case, David Bowie), and, crucially, the outer listening and viewing world of the audience, who, for centuries, have been learning more about others and especially about themselves through such dramatic art forms. We all return to what we have known before.

NOTES

1. See for example <http://bowiesongs.wordpress.com/category/scary-monsters-1980/> and <http://www.bowiegoldenyears.com/scarymonsters.html>.
2. See <http://bowiesongs.wordpress.com/category/scary-monsters-1980/> for an account of how Visconti achieved the song's Wurlitzer sound through using the Eventide Instant Flanger.
3. The artwork featuring Bowie as Pierrot on the cover and liner sleeve for *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* was based on a concept devised by David Bowie and the late Brian Duffy. Duffy's photography was then treated by the artist Edward Bell who interestingly chose to include a number of references to the previous Bowie albums *Heroes*, *Lodger*, *Low* and *Aladdin Sane*. The images are painted over as if to banish them to the past where they belong. Brian Duffy had previously worked with Bowie on the covers for *Aladdin Sane* and *Lodger*, while Edward Bell went on to design the cover of the *Tin Machine* album.
4. Although 'Ashes to Ashes' is sometimes read as representing a clean break with the past it is interesting to note that its B-side was 'Move On' from his *Lodger* album. The obvious connection between 'Ashes to Ashes' and 'Space Oddity' was underlined by RCA who released a 12" version of the single entitled 'The Continuing Story of Major Tom' which simply segued both songs. 'Ashes to Ashes' was Bowie's first number one single since the release of 'Space Oddity'.
5. The work of former glam art rocker (The Bon Bons) turned postal art specialist, Jerry Dreva was the inspiration for the sheets of stamps which accompanied the single's release. Dreva's influence was acknowledged by Bowie by his inclusion of the words 'Bon Bon' on the stamps. The late Dreva was a contemporary of Bowie's in his LA period.
6. The presentation of Bowie as Pierrot owed much to the talents of three people. Richard Sarah (make-up), Gretchen Fenston (hat) and Natasha Korniloff (costume). Korniloff also designed the costumes for the 1967 production of *Pierrot in Turquoise* directed by Lindsay Kemp. Sarah noted how "... David came to me and said he wanted a Pierrot look, and he let me design from there. Most of the time I draw up some ideas and then work with the subject around those. The preparation for David's make-up took one and a half hours". <http://www.bowiegoldenyears.com/scarymonsters.html> (accessed 1 Aug 2014).
7. See Chapter 7 by Helene Thian in this volume.
8. Expressionism was a modernist artistic and literary movement that sought to present the world in terms of emotion, feeling and meaning, from an often exaggerated

- or distorted subjective position. For a detailed discussion of Expressionism, see Gordon (1987).
9. Schoenberg wasn't the only composer of the time to draw upon the figure of Pierrot as a means for inspiration. Eric Satie composed a piece for piano entitled 'Pierrot's Dinner' in 1909 and Claude Debussy's 1915 Sonata for Cello and Piano was, at one point, set to be called 'Pierrot angry at the moon'.
 10. Music that works around a particular hierarchy of relational pitches and chord structures is known as tonal music. Music that treats all pitches as equal and sees chords constructed in a way that any familiar harmonic movement is not really possible or desirable, and uses chromatic scales, i.e. moving up and down by semitones in unrelated ways, is known as atonal music. See Forte (1972 & 1998).
 11. Compare Schoenberg's self-portrait from *The Schönberg Centre*, self-portrait number 008 <http://www.schoenberg.at/index.php/en/schoenberg-2/bildnerischeswerk/selbstportraits> with Bowie's acrylic on canvas self-portrait of 1980 <http://www.bowiewonderworld.com/art/art2.htm> (Scroll down to 'Self Portrait').
 12. Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter were two expressionist movements which evolved in Germany in the first decades of the twentieth century. The groups were made up of architects, painters, writers and musicians who believed in the place of art in the future and viewed their work as being a bridge to that future. Schoenberg was a member and his 1909 composition *Drei Klavierstücke* (Op. 11) inspired fellow Blaue Reiter member Vasily Kandinsky to paint *Impressions III (Concert)*. For more on Expressionism and music, see Behr et al (1993) and Brinkmann (1997).
 13. In another connection with *The Next Day*, Pierrot's joyous dance while waiting for Columbine in *Pierrot in Turquoise* mirrors with the dance sequence in 'Love is Lost'.
 14. See <http://bowiesongs.wordpress.com/2009/10/21/the-mime-songs/>.
 15. Mime, too, has its connections to *Commedia dell'arte*, particularly through the figure of the French theatre director Jaques Copeau (1879–1849). See Kurtz (1999).
 16. In many ways, this version of 'Space Oddity' is more likely the real requiem for Major Tom. The structure has been pared down to solitary vocals, a basic rhythm section, and a restless, aggressive 12-string guitar providing rather harsh harmonic accompaniment. Significantly, the countdown section which appeared in the original version is absent, this silence alluding to perhaps, the void of space and the loss of hope.
 17. Music critic Theodor Adorno cites Brecht and Weill's *The Threepenny Opera* and *The Rise and Fall of City of Mahogany* as powerful Surrealist compositions, in their recognition of illusion and lack of concealment of that state (Adorno, 2002: 395–397).
 18. This can be interpreted in two ways: people were becoming more enamored with money and profit rather than with social relations and/or through their greed, people were ossifying into golden statues. *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahogany* (1930) is a satirical opera which was banned by the Nazis in 1933. The story centres on the founding of a pleasure city by fugitives from the law, seeking to service those coming from the Alaskan gold fields, where the emphasis is on having fun but where, in the end, chaos and despair reigns. The musical score features jazz and ragtime as well as more formal elements of Western art music (see Unwin, 2005; Taylor, 1991). Its themes of debauchery, excess, selfishness,

- pleasure, artifice, exaggeration and depravity resonate with many of the ideas explored by Bowie in his own work during the 1970s.
19. The importance of *The Beggar's Opera* itself, as well as in terms of its adaptation by Weill and Brecht, in reading Bowie's 'Ashes to Ashes', including within the context of the *Scary Monsters* album as a whole, cannot be underestimated. Gay employed numerous, short scenes and a sequence of brief songs in his opera (something that is reflected in the video with sequences cutting to new tableaux at a rapid pace using the postcard effect to change scenery). Even more significantly, Gay's opera proved very successful because he included mementos for the public, including images of his characters on clothing, playing cards and fans. As can be seen in *Scary Monsters*, Bowie has adapted this approach to his own work, harking back to the practices of another place and time while simultaneously creating and feeding desire for the traces of a creative moment and experience, point to the fact that Bowie saw this album as more than an album of songs. It too was a kind of drama with longevity, pointing to the future as much as to the past.
 20. The connection to Gay's satirical and subversive *The Beggars Opera* is significant in other ways too in that this English form, known as Ballad Opera, used popular songs of the day alongside spoken word, and parodied *opera seria* or 'serious', high-art opera from the continent.
 21. 'Mack the Knife', from the Threepenny Opera is perhaps Weill's most famous song, with lyrics by Brecht. The score reveals the strong influence of jazz, and the lyrics by Brecht are full of violence and dark imagery, representing the ominous figure of Mack the Knife who, "when that shark bites with his teeth, babe/scarlet billows start to spread".
 22. David Mallet and Bowie are long-time collaborators with Mallet directing over twelve Bowie videos and concert recordings.
 23. Interview between Eoin Devereux (ED) and David Mallet (DM) April 16th 2014.
 24. Interview between ED and DM April 16th 2014.
 25. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXwS1IJVmVA&feature=youtu.be>. Note the similarities between this and the 'Ashes to Ashes' video in terms of location and overall look.
 26. Interview between ED and DM July 31st 2014. Some of the visual techniques used may also be seen in Mallet's video for The Boomtown Rats 'I Don't Like Mondays' (1980).
 27. The TV performance of 'Space Oddity' was directed by David Mallet for the Thames TV show *Will Kenny Everett Make it to 1980?*
 28. Strange had previously worn Pierrot outfits and his styling in the Visage video for the song 'Fade To Grey' is also worth noting.
 29. Expressionism and Surrealism are linked, with Expressionism dating from about 1890 and Surrealism from the 1920s. Expressionism was less concerned with realistic representations of external reality and more with expressing emotional states and ideas that were taboo (see Gordon, 1987). Surrealism shared these traits but was primarily concerned with the subconscious, with irrational behavior and the relationship between reality and the dream-state (see Durozoi, 2004).
 30. The video is 3.37 minutes in duration. Pierrot appears for a total of 1 minute and 40 seconds, the man in the padded cell is on screen for 42 seconds and Major Tom for just 39 seconds.

31. See for example 'All the Madmen' (1970) and 'Aladdin Sane' (1973).
32. For our analysis we use the official sheet music of 'Ashes to Ashes' (piano part and vocals) published under license from EMI, © 1980 Tintoretto Music/RZO Music Limited (84%)/EMI Music Publishing Limited (16%). We also draw upon recorded versions of the song, including from various youtube clips.
33. See O'Leary's Bowie song blog, <http://bowiesongs.wordpress.com/category/scary-monsters-1980/> (accessed 20 June 2014).
34. The riffs used some thirty-three years later on the DJ James Murphy ten-minute remix of 'Love is Lost' accompanying Bowie's 2013 homemade video speak to this. <http://pitchfork.com/news/52835-video-david-bowie-love-is-lost-remixed-by-james-murphy/> (accessed 20 July 2014).
35. The first line constitutes the measure number, the second the chord, the third the beats within a measure, and the fourth the melodic notes of the riff.
36. It is crucial to note that this six-measure riff appears in the official sheet music of 'Ashes to Ashes' but the 1980s music video only uses the opening four. In many live recordings subsequent to the 1980s' video, right through the 1990s, Bowie returns to this riff and even has it extended and repeated at the start and throughout the song, highlighting how structurally important it is.
37. A further allusion to this rhyme 'I went to sea / no ship to get across' is possibly made in the video when we see Pierrot wading waist-high in the sea.
38. In *Pierrot Lunaire* Schoenberg employed the technique of *Sprechstimme* or speech-song. Speech's melodic quality is represented as higher and lower tone contours in the music score. It is not a songline as we know it, but neither is a simple speech act. *Sprechstimme* is sometimes assumed to have been invented by Schoenberg for *Pierrot Lunaire* but, in fact, the vocal technique and its representation had been used as early as 1897 in Engelbert Humperdinck's *Königskinder*.

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