

# Signs of Mortality in David Bowie's "Black Star" Video Clip



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"Black Star" music video was released two days before Bowie's death (January 8, 2016). It bears various implications of dying and the notion of mortality is both literal and metaphorical. It is highly autobiographical and serves as a theatrical stage for Bowie to act both as a music performer and as a self-conscious human being. In this paper, we discuss the signs of mortality in Bowie's "Black Star" music video-clip. We focus on video's cinematic techniques and codes (editing, *mise-en-scène*), on its motivic elements and on its narrative in relation with music, lyrics, characters, and gestures. We also discuss the video's intertextual references and the broader signification of the black star figure. We adopt a quasi-semiotic approach considering "Black Star" music video-clip as a text which can be investigated through its signs, codes, and conventions of the musical, visual, and cinematic languages as well. Our interdisciplinary tools derive from visual semiotics and audiovisual analysis models (Barthes 1977; Goodwin 1992; Vernallis 2001, 2004), without leaving outside Bowie's musical-artistic and personal history. As it turns out, Bowie created a video clip that is philosophical in nature and poetic in structure, preserving the role of protagonist. With the visuals creating a psychedelic atmosphere, the lyrics often are heard as a personal confession. They both generate cognitive and emotional responses that influence the way the viewers-listeners may experience, decompose, and interpret Bowie's artistic endeavor bridging life and death.

*Keywords:* Bowie, black star, musicology, visual semiotics, aesthetics, philosophy

[...] Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5, 23-28.

## 1. Introduction

"Black Star"<sup>1</sup> was released two days before Bowie's death (January 8, 2016). It was directed by Johan Renck in collaboration with Bowie and bears the late singer's very last artistic signature. Music, lyrics, and images construct a poetic in nature and therefore a quite abstract dramatic world. In this video-clip, we strongly

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feel that Bowie's angst of his forthcoming end played an important role in its representational built. The video-clip bears various implications of dying which evoke emotions of awe, revulsion, and dismay. The notion of mortality is both literal and metaphorical. Moreover, as it turns out, this video-clip, apart from a personal confession, can be seen, also, as a philosophical reflection on the common human fate. Besides, Bowie was drawn to the unknown side of existence all his life. Even during his most commercially popular incarnations, as Stark (2015) posits, Bowie's songs had dark references to spiritual struggle, consciousness, macabre, and the mysteries of death.

In this paper, we discuss the signs of mortality in Bowie's ★. Because of the abundance and the polysemy of signs, we decided to insist more on the materialistic ones: the cinematic techniques and codes (editing, lighting, mise-en-scène, colors, costumes), the motivic elements, and the narrative in relation with the music, lyrics, characters, and gestures. We also discuss the video's intertextual references and the broader signification of the black star figure.

The semiotic universe of a video involves a plethora of signs, codes, and conventions of the musical, visual, and cinematic languages. The signs involve and presuppose materialization in images, in music and sounds, in gestures and language, all these that bear messages already coded and which are expected to be decoded (Florea & David 2014). In our view, the multimodal video world cannot adequately be interpreted through the lens of a single theory. Thus, we adopt a quasi-semiotic approach considering ★ as a text which can be investigated through its codes and signs. Our interdisciplinary tools derive from visual semiotics and audiovisual analysis models (Barthes 1977; Goodwin 1992; Vernallis 2001, 2004). We also take into consideration Bowie's musical-artistic and personal history, being aware that the mysteries of mortality and death tended to permeate his career and creative thinking (Stark 2015). Our questions were:

- What signs of mortality in terms of musical features, performance, and narrative elements are formed in ★?
- How are these signs connected and how do they echo David Bowie's fragile emotional and physical state?
- How is the notion of death represented in ★?

## 2. David Bowie

David Bowie (born David Robert Jones 1947) was a charismatic adventurous multi-creator—songwriter, singer, performer, composer, actor (you may recall “The Man Who Fell to Earth” directed by Nicolas Roeg, “Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence” directed by Nagisa Oshima, “Labyrinth” directed by Jim Henson, “The Hunger” directed by Tony Scott), music and film producer, writer, art collector, fashion icon and painter—a free spirit and a romantic wanderer without peace. He always had seen ahead of his time and became known as one of the people who brought philosophical thinking into the mainstream. His posters and album covers are based on art movements, art works, and artists who inspired him. He was a deep thinker, an intellectually, musically, and visually compelling artist (Power et al., 2015) who continually exceeded the established industry standards. According to Leah Kardos (2017), the magical combination of sound and vision is something that Bowie has played with throughout his career, offering not only new music ideas via his recordings, but also via well-conceived visual signifiers (553).

Bowie's traits are manifested in a broad spectrum of identities and cannot be restrained to a common denominator. His polysemy in expression and his artistic creativity are reflected in his tendency for breaking the aesthetic barriers between different music genres (rock'n'roll, disco, glam rock, sci-fi pop, new wave,

industrial rock, soul, funk, and electronica), and in his various personas he has deployed throughout his career as well. These multiple personas impacted profoundly both his psyche and art (Power et al., 2015) and were manifested through his and alter ego's characters—the glam Ziggy Stardust (1971-1973), Halloween Jack (1974), the avant-garde Thin White Duke (1976), and Tin Machine (1989-1992)—and through iconic songs like "Space Oddity," "Starman," "Rebel Rebel," "Heroes," "Fashion," and "Let's Dance" (Dixon 2015). It is not exaggeration to say that he "helped establish a key part of Western twenty-first liberal belief: that anybody should be allowed to be what they want to be" and "be yourself, whatever that is" (Broackes & Marsh 2013, 46).

The vast list of his influences includes Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, George Orwell, Andy Warhol, Stanley Kubrick, Velvet Underground, Aleister Crowley, Francis Bacon, Georges Rodenbach, Marcel Marceau, and Dadaists and Surrealists artists. All these influenced his creative genius and his heretic artistry. For Ian Dixon (2015), "Bowie represents the triumph of high art in popular music having firmly wedged himself into the zeitgeist [...] while exemplifying the very spirit of rock creativity and its synthesis with art and literature" (73). One might say that David Bowie's personas epitomize Marshall McLuhan's famous quoting "The Medium is the Message." Bowie's apparent restless creativity and his sophisticated experimental work inspired countless musicians and people from all over the world (Cinque & Redmond 2016). His ingenious expression as a performer occupies a distinctive and visionary space in the history of pop culture.

### 3. About the Video: Music, Lyrics, Images, and Narrative

The ★ begins in a remote planet where we see the corpse of a dead spaceman as a human detritus lain thereby. A young female with a tail is coming upon it. The tailed girl removes the adorned with jewels skull and walks towards an otherworldly ancient town, the mythical Villa of Ormen (as suggested in the lyrics). Villa of Ormen is built around an acropolis. It is an old, deserted, and absolutely barren of life, little town. The streets are narrow, the roads dirty, and the buildings short. Soon a pagan death ritual is about to begin. Behind the acropolis, three anthropomorphic scarecrows are being crucified, while a heavy storm is approaching.

At the same time, Bowie is standing outside from what it seems to be an attic of a house. He seems confused, wrongly sentenced, and trapped. His head is bandaged with buttons for eyes. Inside the attic room three allegorical, cartoon-like figures of a male, a female, and an unspecified gender are shaking in a neurotic way. Their skin complexion varies: One of the young men has the complexion of an albino; the other one has dark brown skin and the asexual figure is of white complexion again. This variety seems to enhance the black-white contrast of the album's cover and leaves a hint regarding the exploration of the sexual identity as well. They seem to bear neither a past nor a future. They are fake figments of an imagination. Their cartoonist nature adds to the sarcasm of the song. In the following scene, Bowie is holding a book with the black star icon on its cover gazing up at something unseen.

As the video comes to its end, we are thrown at the scene of the crucifixion. We see three scarecrows in a wheat field experiencing excruciating pain. Bound to their crosses they are unarmed, totally helpless. These desperate figures are not quite human; they ghostly resonate the life/death dichotomy. In the same field, a looming monstrous creature is approaching. Its presence induces terror. It is like watching a scene from a nightmare or a horror movie. As the women's ritual keeps on, the monstrous creature attacks the scarecrows; Bowie outside the attic collapses on the floor; then Black Star and then it is over.

In the video, Bowie treats himself as an object of gaze. He clearly incarnates three characters: the Disabled Bandaged-Head (he is bandaged around the head with buttons where his eyes are), the Dramatic-Singer, and the Revolutionary Missionary. All characters are distinct and highly iconic. As the story progresses, the characters seem to complement each other, bridging the in-between spaces between life and death, fear and irony, impotence and energy, vulnerability and empowerment, physical and metaphysical.

The video-clip has a gothic aesthetic; the representation of the spaces can be seen as portentous, or macabre. The narrative world shifts between eerie abandoned spaces (planet, ancient town) and more or less busy, crowded spaces (ritual and crucifixion scenes, attic room); most of the time they appear through the haze gaining a psychedelic quality. In most landscapes, time is achromatic. For the main part of the video, the atmosphere is stressful bearing also a sense of mysticism.

The beginning of the video reifies death as discontinuity. The lifeless astronaut in the lonely planet suggests both the appearance of life and its negation. In the planet, the absence of sunlight connotes the absence of life. The attic room with the vaulted ceiling appears like a miniature of Roman church and thus can be seen as a place for self-consciousness; a place in which Bowie stands exposed and vulnerable. The shape of the attic's ceiling can be related to the blackstar's angles. Bowie appears to sing inside it as if he is on his very own stage, in his final performance. Many motifs operate as fetish objects or archetypes, like ritualistic dances, skeleton, candle, and crucifixion (pic. 1) (pic. 2).



Pic. 1.



Pic. 2.

It is well known Bowie's ongoing fascination with existential and hermetic themes such as the unconscious, the macabre, mysticism, and the esoteric spirituality. The symbolic centrality of death permeates his career (Stark 2015). Given that, it is no risky to attest the lyrics of ★, and its cinematic features are exploring the same ideas again. However, this time it feels that things are seen much more from a personal perspective. Bowie at the same time is confessing and confirming something about him. Irony about death is defused in the lyrics ("You are a flesh in the pan/I am the Great I am") and in his acting as well, especially when he impersonates the Dramatic Singer at the attic-church. The lyrics are abstruse, ambiguous, and mysterious. He may not be using the exact words, but he is saying it out loud: "Life doesn't make any sense, I am dying."

The song—described by Alexis Petridis as "lyrically inscrutable and thrillingly strange" (Kardos 2017, 561)—is the main force that drives the video-clip. Jazz is the musical genre that predominates on ★ though there are amalgamating elements associated with various music genres which create a dynamic dramatic effect. The song presents a high level of rhythmic complexity. The music has a hymnal quality to complement the existential dimension of the lyrics. The musical features—melancholic dark tones, sweeping jazzy harmonies and shamanic melodies, conflicting tones, penetrating woodwinds sounds—create the audio environment in which the psychological world of Bowie is deployed. The song's slow rhythmic stratum suggests meditation. Its tonal and timbral qualities signify nostalgia and decomposition.

The song consists of two different music worlds: modal paths and Western tonalities. These two worlds resonate the opposition between the Cartesian Western way of thinking and the Eastern philosophy. The use of the Phrygian mode produces a dark, middle-eastern sounding effect (Kardos 2017). Generally speaking, we may say that Bowie drew patterns from different cultures in order to depict the theme of death and used religious patterns to channel the metaphysical suffocation. Overall, music highlights the video-clip's atmospheric visuals and vice versa (Kokkidou & Paschali, forthcoming).

A connotative lack of energy can be observed in restricted melodic movement (monotone melodies); short, repetitive phrases; slow tempo; descending phrases; musically processes from high to low tension; and low

pitch. In these ways the music style, along with the occult lyrics, epitomizes the death experience. The music is rooted in group improvisations with dark rich texture. Bowie's theatrical, impressive-deep voice enhances the impact of the lyrics evoking feelings of discomfort and unease.

Bal and Bryson (1991) posit that the significance of a sign develops as we perceive it in relation to others, when the subject enters "into the networks of signification" (200). In this aspect, in our cross-examination of the video signs, we found out that they share several structural and conceptual features, although the visual and acoustic semiotic systems are qualitatively different. With respect to music and lyrics, the harmonic elements seem to privilege dissonant intervals and chords which sometimes deny resolution (like in the verse "At the center of it all, your eyes"), supporting the enigmatic quality of the lyrics. Dissonance in music signifies discomfort, with all sorts of connotations. The vocal melodies are often not tonally centered and many melodic phrases do not end to the tonic. Expecting a resolution to a tonic which does not happen gives the listener a sense of anxiety and confusion. The soft vocal timbres, with a greater emphasis on middle and lower pitches, may signify moments of meditation. The unsolved music tension becomes a metaphor for Bowie's fragmented psyche.

The video world combines the reality with the surreality of an illusion; the conscious with the trans-conscious; the spiritual with the senses; the predictable with the changeable; the life with the afterlife; and the barren knowledge with the intuition. In this world, Bowie appears as a whole.

#### **4. About the Black Star Icon**

The black star icon may take on various connotations. First of all, it is important to mention that *Black Star* is the only album of Bowie which does not carry his image or any other title on the cover. Perhaps it is because he could foresee that this would be his very last. The only thing we see on the front cover is the monumental black star like the eclipse shadows everything else. The outline of the star consists of straight lines and sharp edges. The symmetry of the shape makes the star look harmonious, beautiful and well-balanced. The tension around the edges and the light that comes from within makes it a very powerful icon. The color contrast returns us to the basics. Black and white; it cannot get any simpler than that. The overall aesthetic is minimalistic and rigid; the whole synthesis is strict and cold. We are looking at a genuine, dense black shaped in a form of a star.

In a 2016 interview, Jonathan Barnbrook, the graphic designer of the *Black Star* album cover, stated that the black star figure carries deeper meanings and explained that it was designed "to reflect Bowie's mortality: The black star symbol [★], rather than writing "black star," has a sort of finality, a darkness, a simplicity, which is a representation of the music" (Howarth 2016). Also, it is essential here to underline that when it comes to the album of *Black Star*, media, social, or other, are assigned to use only the black icon instead of the written word. This way, every time we are reading something about the album or the video-clip of ★, we are encountering the black star icon. This awkward, sudden silence kind of irritates us. It carries an unjustified discontinuity, a blank in the middle of a messy and busy context. This simple replacement of the written word with the icon could be taken as another hint of mortality.

Barnbrook had been Bowie's graphic designer for years. He has admitted that he has been inspired by Kazimir Malevich for Bowie's previous album "The Next Day," which has a white square with the album's title concealing Bowie's face (Howarth 2016). Given Barnbrook's influence by Kazimir Malevich—who gave art a transcendental dimension "freeing it from the tyranny of objects" (Neret 2003, 7)—we may suggest the black

star icon is related again to Malevich's Black Square; only this time with more profound connotations.

In Black Square, Malevich went beyond subject matter. He used simplicity, abstraction, and form to explore the mysticality of space and time. Bowie's black star seems deeply influenced by this perspective. It is possible that he wanted people to draw the connection between the Black Star and the Black Square and like Malevich to use it as his personal emblem. As he approaches the end of his life, he boils down his entire life in a single icon which although for us is another trade mark, for him seems to be a spiritual portal to another dimension. He seems to look at death as a transcendental experience which he even finds intriguing. As he had declared in the past: "I don't know where I am going from here, but I promise it won't be boring" (Blair 2016).

### 5. Gestures as Signifiers of Inability

Bodily gestures usually imply a kinetic visual utterance communicated by a recognizable act of the body in motion, while posing implies a visual attitude communicated by a static positioning of the body (Perrott 2017). Gestures are iconic in their nature and could be understood as an utterance that carries a pervasive psychic quality, making visible one's inner state. In ★, gestures present us with many opportunities for reading them as they carry connotations of agony in remarkable ways and are used as a means of illustrating the tension of a transitive experience.

In the outdoor attic scenes, Bowie's gestures appear as dormant connoting his physical fragility. He is a tragic hero; fate is guiding him like a little puppet. When performing inside the attic, his gestures become expressive and in accordance with the lyrics. He does not intend to astonish the audience through his performance. He brings his hands together like in prayer as he sings "Something happened on the day he died [...] / Somebody else took his place and bravely cried." The stanza beginning "I can't answer why (I'm a Black Star)" seems to suggest a communication between Bowie and the "angel of Death." Death has arrived, ready to take him on his final journey and is dictating him: "Take your passport and shoes/and your sedatives (boo)/[...] / I am the Great I am" (pic. 3) (pic. 4).



Pic. 3.



Pic. 4.

On the contrary, Bowie's bodily expression as Revolutionary Missionary is somehow cynical. The character is standing still holding a book. His pose is easily recognizable. It is the pose of an enlightened leader who moves humanity forward. He is holding his testament in his hands as he is offering it to mankind. The figure of Revolutionary Missionary is an epic powerful one; he is standing with eyes wide open and senses alert, as an opposite to the Disabled Bandaged-Head figure.

The three dancers are shaking in a way that seems to externalize an inner drama. Their shaking mimics how Bowie is moving though in exaggeration. Their movements create the impression of a world that has been turned into something other than human. No interaction takes place among them. What animates them seems peculiar. It is not clear whether they are in a hypnotic state, under huge pressure, or having an ecstatic experience. It appears that their dance will never end and their movements take on an independent life of their own. The idea of death is mapped against the unceasing motion of the dancers. Their movements are reminiscent of Hans Christian Anderson's dark tale about the young girl cursed by a mysterious man to dance until cutting her feet off.

The women of the ceremony shake with the same firmness as the three dancers in the attic. Their movements assume traits of rituality and loss of bodily control. Their bodies seem to freak out at the presence of death. The female ritualist, though she is not shaking, carries a metaphysical energy. She is at the center of the activity and the creator of meaning. The three crucified scarecrows, who all have bandages around their eyes and button for eyes, wait for their fates; shaking, releasing an affective intensity. Their images are suggestive of illness and pain. Yet, they make grimaces and move blatantly, swinging their hips. It is like mocking traditional Western religion habits. In this context, ★ is seen to articulate spiritual values but at the same time to critique typical religion values, especially the Judeo-Christian promise of an after-life at "Paradise" (the scene with the three nailed scarecrows).

Overall, we recognize shaking as the salient motivic gestural element of the video. The quality of this gesture is menacing and ominous. Bowie's poses and body movements operate together to visualize the

psychological experience of his transitive presence from life to death.

## 6. Cinematic Codes: Editing, Color, and Lighting

In his book *Audio-Vision*, Michel Chion (1994) makes the claim that “we never see the same thing when we also hear,” and “we don’t hear the same thing when we see as well” (xxvi). This is exactly the case for the ★. Cinematography enhances the meaning in several ways.

The editing of the video is rather conventional: most plans change in accordance with music with a rather predictable way. Most significantly, and unlike most music videos, in ★, there are no unexpected zooms or cuts, no rapid cutting or frenetic pace. This may imply that there are no surprises when dead. Everything is in order and nothing changes.

The camera is rather static and does not follow the conventions of the camera’s movement in rock videos. The frames unfold especially slowly connoting Bowie’s slow death. There are many long shots and the camera seems to follow the narrative in a patient and tolerant way, attempting to grasp movements and actions in a fixed manner. The panoramic long shots of Villa of Ormen add glory to the image, creating a feeling of dream consciousness that emerges through the mystique forms. The slow pace of the editing can be associated with the slow tempo of the music and with the idea of self-reflection. One might say that both editing and music are kind of achronic and bear the symbolism of a funeral.

Editing creates another rhythmic voice (Vernallis 2001) and bears much of the brunt of describing Bowie’s emotional state. It also functions musically, underscoring the rhythmic arrangement, the slow tempo of the song, its phrasing and the sweeping melodic phrases. It is important to note that editing does not place the viewers in the position of the characters. On the other hand, Bowie’s injured images seem to evoke the desire for voyeurism.

In general, Bowie’s shots alternate between medium and medium close-ups, suggesting a sense of intimacy. In the few close-up shots, Bowie rarely looks straight at the camera or looks at it in disguise when he puts on the bandage mask. Unlike conventional pop videos where artists establish a connection to the viewers by looking straight into the camera, Bowie prompts emotions close to a tragic hero’s. The only extreme close-up of the singer occurs in the attic section, where we see shots featuring Bowie’s and tailed girl’s eyes (5:12-5:19). The tailed girl’s gaze does not indicate a threat; it is like flirting with him. She acts like a death figure that allures its victim. So, this close-up functions as a sarcastic comment and stands as a sign for Bowie’s notion towards death.

A typical music video places the singer in front and in the centre. According to Vernallis (2001), when the singer is placed in the centre of the frame this suggests stability, importance and clarity (28). Nevertheless, in ★ Bowie is generally located at the periphery of the shot. Thus, as Bowie is placed off centre, his image lacks stability and it seems more fragile and weak. There is a lack of profound association between his significance as a rock star with his position on the frame. Moreover, the camera never captures his entire body. It zooms in certain parts of his body and the bodies of the other characters as well. In the last section of the video (8:23), one could observe the inability of the camera to stay in focus. This aligns with the singer’s dramatic state.

The conventional character of editing can be further linked to Bowie’s costumes. In ★, Bowie impersonates three characters but the costumes he wears are basically the same with small differentiations. The first and the second costume we get to see only from the waist up while we see the third costume from the knees up. All costumes consist of a white shirt, a black suit, and black trousers. In the third costume, the suit is

open and we get to see a buttoned vest. His whole appearance is fully ordinary. It is as if he does not want to stand out. In his last moments, he is one of us.

In ★, the use of color and lighting connotes mortality and enhances the idea of unconsciousness. Color is a semiotic mode which is multifunctional and culturally located in the making of signs (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2002). Color, in general, is also used in a music video to evoke emotions and create moods; illuminate musical changes in song structure; to reflect musical elements such as texture and timbre; to draw attention to the materiality of the music; and to construct meanings (Vernallis 2004; Goodwin 1992, 64-65) (pic. 5) (pic. 6).



Pic. 5.



Pic. 6.

Lighting brings drama into the video. The contrasts in lighting make the ★ photography fascinating. The

video hovers between dark and blurring images suggesting an oscillation between conscious and semi-conscious, between nothingness and disappearance. In the cold-warm continuum (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2002), the orange colors may connote warmth and intimacy while the blue colors could be related to cold and distance. The use of shadows and semidarkness in the ritual sequences highlights the idea of mysticality. The dark tones of the lighting emphasize the video's tenebrosity and magnify the monstrous characters and elements of the story. Interestingly, in the Revolutionary Missionary sequences, the entire atmosphere is brighter. But, we soon realize that Bowie and the three dancers are in front of a blue-sky artificial background, in a fake-exterior space. This undermines the uncanny and makes an ironic statement about the brightness of the scene. Finally, in the attic scene, in the line "Somebody else took his place and bravely cried," the light that enters through the window creates a surrealistic halo effect around Bowie's head. This makes him appear like a mythical figure or a martyr. At the end of the video, all light is swollen by the gravitational pull of black star, to the edge of vanishing.

All in all, in spite of the slow editing, the video creates tension in many ways. The blurring images complement the smooth timbres of the song and long-held tones and the cryptic, poetic language of the lyrics. The video's dark hues of images reflect the darkness transmitted by the lyrics and the sense of sorrow which reveals from the atmospheric musical themes.

## **7. Cycle as Signifier of the Circularity of Life and Death**

The video underscores cyclical forms in a lot of manners; literally and metaphorically, verbally and musically. Realistically, we see circles everywhere. First of all, we have the sun eclipse which is a quite powerful sign to begin with. The notion of circularity is also visible in the ritualistic circle formed by a group of women in an empty space, cyclical vibrating movements when ritual is taking place, eye pupils, round buttons for eyes and the bright, small window of the attic/church-like room. In the meantime, the repetitive patterns of the song keep referring to a center of it all, which can be interpreted as a centre of the plot, of the frame or even of attention. Yet, a circle is implied here as well, where a set of eyes or the candle has been put in the middle. The candle, the skeleton, and the astronaut's skull come up again and again, in various forms, more as re-cycling motifs than objects of the plot itself. In that way, the visual elements are managed to create cycles of meanings associated to the idea of the circle of life and death. The structure of the music (ABA form, small repetitive patterns) helps to point out the notion of circularity as well. The video's periodic cycling between control and lack of control is largely formed through the deployment of the lighting, the altering between warmth and cool colors. Additionally, the idea of cycle is manifested in the appearance of the black star figure: the video starts and ends with a black star.

We also traced the idea of circle of life in the ritualistic killing of Major Tom which was Bowie's first impersonated, famous character. If we were to take it a step further, apart from the circle we can acknowledge the pattern of round, black holes as well. The scene of the dark eclipse with the floating skeleton gives us the impression not only of a circle but of a slow movement towards a black hole. The astronaut's cask, the eye' gaps on the skull, the village of Ormen's doors, the monstrous puppet's mouth, everything forms a dark hole. Also, we sensed a circularity here as well; the dark womb with the dark hole; everything that begins in the darkness of the womb will end in dark. This is the life circle of everything.

The idea of cycle is also demonstrated in the symmetry of the shots and through the juxtaposition of the ideas of life and death. The motif of the jerking movements and the ritualistic killing off of Major Tom

character are positioned symmetrically in the whole narration, suggesting a line of symmetry. This symmetry is also encompassed in the song's cyclical form and in the repetitive motifs in song lyrics. Considering the context of the song, symmetry does not symbolize balance. It is likely a signifier of the destined; where random or different possibilities do not longer exist.

### **8. Mise-en-scène: Skull**

In ★, a human skull, encrusted in jewels, is in the center of attention. The skull is kept in the dark, inside the space helmet of the dead astronaut. The tailed girl carefully opens the helmet and brings it to light. She chooses to carry only that from the dead corpse. As the head is being detached, the body loses its human identity and drifts away like an asteroid. The story starts as soon as she holds it in her hands.

The skull used in the video is not an ordinary one. It is not decayed or broken. It is not filthy covered in mud or dirt. This skull is neat, decorated with jewelry. The tailed girl carries it in the open proudly. The skull travels from the lonely planet to Villa of Ormen. There, the tailed girl leaves it in the hands of the female ritualist, like an offering, who although receives a dead body part, stays calm and distant, while the rest of the chorus, crawl down in a seizure. Towards the end of the ritual, the ritualist leaves the skull on the back of a human. From the way the music goes, we sense that the story has reached a dramatic peak.

In Niall Boyce's view (2016, 529), the skull is not just a skull. It is a symbol of transformation. The skull evolves from a body part to a symbol. Its decoration bears resemblance to Aztec customs and Mexican attitude towards death (Irish, Lundquist & Nelsen 1993).

The skull is not depressing. It is fancy and colorful. The precious stones convey elegance, wealth, and festivity. It looks more of a present than of a scary reminder of what is to come. In every aspect, the skull symbolizes mortality. Its beauty and shine paradoxically evokes a sense of positivity. After all, death is part of the human experience. What's to be afraid of?

When the skull is placed on the back of the dancer, in the middle of the ceremony, a peculiar feeling of discomfort overwhelms us. Death, at the same time, concerns each one of us individually. Nothing is more certain than our own end. And yet waves of existential agony are provoked at the thought of it. During its whole presence in the video, Bowie seems to look at it and respond through his lyrics like a modern Hamlet: "I can't answer why/But I can tell you how/We were born upside down/Born the wrong way 'round.'"

### **9. Mise-en-scène: Candle**

The ontology of the video's props might be suggestive of the tragedy of death alongside with the ideas of eternity and transcendence. The image of the "solitary candle" is introduced in the second verse of the song. In the video, we see this candle standing at the heart of the town, as a significant monument. It is tall and thick, but it is slowly burning out. Its texture and color resemble human complexion. From the volume of the melt wax mass, we can assume that it has been burning for quite some time. The candle is the only source of light in the town. Its weak, small flame sheds a warm glow to the streets of the old town. As light is fading out, the shadows are becoming larger and deeper.

The candle in the film is an immovable prop. It stands still and none of the characters interfere with it. However, strong associations are made between the candle and the sentenced Disabled Bandaged-Head and between the vividness of its glow and the trembling movement of the dancers. The candle implies sentenced Disabled Bandaged-Head's life and forthcoming end. He doesn't know when but he knows it is not far. The

chant of the verse "In the Villa of Ormen stands a solitary candle" underlines the spirituality of the forthcoming ritual. After the storm, the candle is blown and the whole town sinks into darkness. Disabled Bandaged-Head character is dead. Bowie has disappeared into the darkness.

It is interesting to point out that the image of the candle is put in an intercalary way into the action. The candle is shown after the skull when it still belongs to the dead corpse, after the trembling movement of the dancers at the attic, after Disabled Bandaged-Head character, when the lighting of the storm hits the town and right after the execution. The timing of its burning out is characteristic as well; it is not by chance that it is out right after the execution (pic. 7) (pic. 8).



Pic. 7.



Pic. 8.

Many cultures have long used candles as a symbol of eternity. However, in this video, the candle symbolizes time. It depicts the fragility and shortness of life. Like human life it lasts a certain amount of time and it can be out any moment very easily. Its light is always accompanied by a shadow. The moment the candle goes out everything is swollen by it. The candles were often used in art to remind the viewer of the vanity of life, that nothing lasts forever and that everything has to die. It is a strong symbol of mortality.

## 10. Intertextuality

Intertextuality is an important characteristic of music videos. According to Goodwin's theory (1992), many videos are likely to be intertextual references to other forms of media, like films, other videos, or TV series. While it is not easy to trace the influences in every music video, knowing Bowie's tendency for intertextual referencing we feel safe to make some suggestions. More specifically, in the ★ song and video one may detect numerous musical and filmic references to Bowie's canon: from recalling the "Space Oddity" song, the persona of alien rock-god Ziggy Stardust (a man who fell to earth), the "Dead Man Walking" song ("And I'm gone/Like I'm dancing on angels/[...] Like a dead man walking"), to the films "The Man Who Fell to Earth" and the video "The Next Day" (where one can see him acting as a Christ-like figure), and even to the stage play "Lazarus." According to Reed (2016), in ★, we may be front of a new persona, perhaps "Lazarus." Kardos (2017) writes: "The symbols, language, references fell into place for many, like a macabre puzzle box where the final piece needed to solve it was provided with Bowie's passing" (561).

Lyrically, the Black Star song appears as an extension of his song "The Stars (Are out Tonight):" ("Stars are never sleeping/Dead ones and the living [...]/Their jealousy's spilling down/The stars must stick together/We will never be rid of these stars/But I hope they live forever"). In the sections where Bowie captures the title of the song in repetition, he mentions some characters (filmstar/marvel star/popstar/gangstar/flam star/white star/porn star/wandering star) he obviously alludes to the personas he had deployed over the years of his career. Bowie consistently embraced an ever-changing referential style (Reed 2016) and tended to play the "self-quotation" game (Perrott 2017). This tendency is confirmed in ★ when he presents his own previously performed artistic personas. On the other hand, this can be interpreted as a personal contemplation: Humans live in their delusions of grandeur until they have to face their inevitable destination.

The video also bears traces of the film "Labyrinth:" the ancient town reminds us of the Labyrinthine space before the castle and the tailed girl looks like Jennifer Connelly. The building stairs in the Villa of Ormen somewhat bear resemblance to Escher's famous *House of Stairs* (1951), in which a strange world is depicted, where the laws of physics do not apply. Villa of Ormen is not an ordinary place either. The astronaut figure is a direct reference to "Starman" and his presence here as a dead body suggests that Bowie's musical journey is over. The motivic element of crucifixion can be identified in Bowie's 1985 song "Loving the Alien" ("Christians and the unbelievers, hanging by the cross and nail").

Gaze and eyes are recurring symbols in Bowie's videos (e.g., "Scary Monsters," "No Control"). In these videos, the eyes are not just facial elements. They are the part of the body where the presence or absence of life is most manifested. Bowie's eyes became also an iconic emblem in Roeg's film "The Man Who Fell to Earth" (1976). The Disabled Bandaged-Head character is reminiscent of the "Jump They Say" video where he is featured with bandaged eyes.

The video also references in many ways of Kubrick's film 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), a kind of starting point of Bowie's career (Space Odyssey-Space Oddity). It contains comments on the trans-humanist

ideas of the film: the surviving astronaut who got into another dimension, possibly falling into the black monolith; the astronaut lost in the universe (the floating skeleton). The skeleton in a spacesuit on the blue planet may operate as reference to the ultimate fate of Major Tom. In "Space Oddity," Bowie, as Major Tom, sings: "I'm stepping through the door. And I'm floating in a most peculiar way/And the stars look very different today/[...] Planet Earth is blue/And there's nothing I can do." According to Boyce (2016, 528), Bowie's monumental song "Space Oddity" (1969) represents a considerable change in his approach to the issues of fragility and mortality. The astronaut Major Tom, during his journey into space, leaves the safety of his capsule and experiences the unique sense of non-gravity. When communication is lost between Major Tom and Ground Control, Major Tom is aware that he will never return to earth. He is destined to die in space. Obviously, the "Space Oddity" song is not simply the story of an accident in space. It is rather a story of a metamorphosis. Similarly, ★ describes a transformational experience and Bowie's inability to change his fate. Bowie resurrects Major Tom and grants him emblematic closure.

We also detected common elements between ★ and "Lazarus." Both videos were produced when Bowie knew he was seriously ill. Both of them use the same visual narrative motifs—Disabled Bandaged-Head figure—bearing also similarities to the musical material. Lyrically, they share the motivic notion of mortality: "Look up here, I'm in heaven/I've got scars that can't be seen/I've got drama, can't be stolen/Everybody knows me now." Bowie's image with gauzes superposed around his head stands as a metaphor to the biblical story of Lazarus and symbolically represents his transformation from being-a-star to becoming-a-legend.

Niall Boyce (2016) suggests that the Black Star song draws parallels to Ariel's song in William Shakespeare's oeuvre "The Tempest." Ariel's song is taken by many scholars to be Shakespeare's farewell to his art: "Full fathom five thy father lies/Of his bones are coral made:/Those are pearls that were his eyes:/Nothing of him that doth fade/But doth suffer a sea-change/Into something rich and strange."

The concept of death penetrates lyrically and visually not only ★ but also Bowie's prophetic album "The Next Day," released on his 66th birthday in 2013, where death is approached as catharsis, as symbol, as mystery and revenge (Stark 2015). At any rate, Bowie's rebellious biography involves many artistic suicides and resurrection moments: rise and fall and rise again trajectories (Cinque & Redmond 2016).

Considering all these intertextual references it seems that ★ functions as a metaphor of Bowie's artistic life and of his struggling with his inevitable fate. Bowie keeps an ironic distance and proximity as well to his career by blurring the barriers between his personal story, his artistic story, and fiction. This is both a symbolic presence and a symbolic absence. Bowie, in his testimonial Black Star song, tells us that although his life will end, it is possible that he will move into the immortal realm of art.

## 11. Coda

A salient function of music videos is to promote a song or an album, and enhance the publicity of the artists (Goodwin 1992). This is not the case of ★. This video is highly autobiographical and serves as a theatrical stage for Bowie to act both as a music performer and as a self-conscious human being. Bowie is dealing with the horror of death both presenting his painful experience and distancing himself from it. We know that illness and death were part of the Black Star project right from the start. Bowie himself has attested to Jonathan Barnbrook that the lyrics in the album are very honest. We may presume that ★ song and video had a cathartic function and impact upon his psyche. Yet, he seems unable to answer the eternal philosophical question (To be or not to be?) that inevitably is being faced with.

In ★, Bowie turns from a tragic hero, into an influential rebel and then into a dramatic performer. All these characters that he impersonates are parts of his fragmented psyche. He is at the same time a puppet, a sentenced, a modern Hamlet, an enlightened leader, an artist. And he changes these personas in every little move under the umbrella of the Black Star which is both on the book he holds and, also, in the lyrics.

Bowie was a cultural alchemist, a gestural animator, a cultural investigator of identity, and an activist (Perrott 2017), one of the promoters in social groups struggling for cultural reformation. The public mourning after his death—tributes, articles, private commentaries on what he meant to so many people, and so on—bears witness to his huge impact in artistic-musical, cultural-social, and psychological-personal level to so many individuals and social groups.

In this paper, we discussed signifiers of mortality in ★. Signs thrive in the video. We think that the signs we have examined cohere semiotically and discursively—even though a number of distinct modes are used. The music, the lyrics, the characters (bodies and movements), the settings, and the props, all form a network of meanings in a dialectic relationship. We argue that Bowie's point of view is not purely fatalistic: He approaches the themes of illness and mortality not only as a "tragedy of knowing" but also as a transcendent experience altogether. Besides, Ernest Becker, in *The Denial of Death*, stresses that repressing the fear of death is not the same as losing the fear of death (Becker 2007, 20).

This paper serves as an extension to our previous study (Kokkidou & Paschali, forthcoming) in which we investigated how lyrics, music, visuals, and narrative elements mirror each other in meaning construction in ★. Taking as a whole, these studies make clear that the more we delve into a text, the deeper and heightened is our understanding of it. It is our hope that the present analysis may become the basis for further studies.

## Notes

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1. In this paper, we use the black star icon [★] instead of "black star video-clip" as another hidden hint of mortality.

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