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“Like some cat from Japan”: David Bowie’s Global Strategy

(« Like some cat from Japan » : La stratégie globale de David Bowie)

Abstract: This article analyzes how David Bowie borrowed a number of codes and art forms from Japanese culture and incorporated them into his own research. It explores the complex interplay of exchange and circulation between elite and pop culture, and the integration of traditional and avant-garde practices into an approach that is both commercial and artistically ambitious, and the impact this stylistic entanglement has on concepts such as the mainstream or the underground.

Résumé: Cet article analyse la façon dont David Bowie a emprunté à la culture japonaise un certain nombre de codes et de formes artistiques pour les incorporer à ses propres recherches. Il explore le jeu complexe d'échanges et de circulations entre une culture savante et une culture pop, l'intégration de pratiques traditionnelles et avant-gardistes à une démarche qui se veut à la fois commerciale et artistiquement ambitieuse et l'impact que cet enchevêtrement stylistique exerce sur les notions de *mainstream* et d'*underground*.

Key words: David Bowie, Japan, avant-garde, tradition, pop culture

Mots clés: David Bowie, Japon, avant-garde, tradition, culture pop

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Introduction

“Like some cat from Japan”: the line from “Ziggy Stardust”¹ could be an apt autobiographical description of David Bowie, so dense and multifarious is his relationship with Japan, a relationship that started very early in his career, long before he became a rock’n’roll star. Now, many of the practices Bowie borrowed from Japan do not belong to popular culture. Though most Japanese people are familiar with them, they rather belong to avant-garde or classical culture, and as such could hardly be described, either, as mainstream. However, through Bowie’s appropriations, these practices gained worldwide exposure, and entered, at least subliminally, Western consciousness. This raises the question of the impact of such heightened recognition. Have these practices become, in the process, more mainstream in their country of origin? Has, on the contrary, their integration into Bowie’s art made the latter more obscure, arcane, and underground? Have these art forms, combined by Bowie with rock music, changed the nature of what is popular, or of what is rock? Have these cross-cultural, interclass exchanges altered our understanding of the mainstream and the underground, the middle-of-the-road and the avant-garde? Or have these categories become so porous that they have lost any semblance of meaning and relevance?

Focusing on the fairly narrow topic of Bowie’s relationship with Japan may thus prove a fruitful exploration of the questions raised by this issue of the *Revue française de civilisation britannique*. I shall first retrace the history and nature of Bowie’s involvement with Japan. I will then briefly comment on the social impact of these borrowings, before trying to answer some of the questions raised by the journal, particularly in the context of late-Seventies, early-Eighties Britain.

The Japanese connections

The first, obvious entry point to appreciate Bowie’s connection with Japan is “Moss Garden”. The song, an instrumental co-written during the summer 1977 with Brian Eno according to his “Oblique Strategies”² technique, was released on *Heroes* (1977). It was explicitly meant by Bowie to evoke Saiho-ji, a temple in Kyoto famous for its moss garden, that he had visited while on tour. What makes the song particularly interesting is that alongside Eno’s Yamaha synthesizer, Bowie plays, in a fairly simplistic manner, a *koto*. The instrument has a long history: it derives from the ancient Chinese *zheng*, perhaps via the Korean *kayageum*. If it was initially an instrument for the wealthy, it became, during the 19th century, a rather romantic, almost popular one, a social skill, much like the piano for the young ladies of the bourgeoisie throughout Europe. It fell again into relative oblivion in post-World War II, Americanized Japan, before recovering to some extent its currency, but in a different context. It can now be heard not only in classical Japanese music, but also by performers such as Reiko Obata or Miya Masaoka in jazz, world, electroacoustic, or experimental music. What happens when

¹ The song is featured on the album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), generally recognized as Bowie’s first global success.

² “Oblique Strategies” is a deck of oracle cards which Brian Eno developed and published, modelled philosophically on the ancient Chinese I Ching, conceived as aids to the creative process. Each proverb was designed to frame a work-in-progress in a fresh perspective when the artist got bogged down in details, unable to maintain a sense of creative options. The short messages on the cards are varied, evocative and often intentionally cryptic. Some examples, randomly chosen from the deck: ‘Would anybody want it?’ ‘Go slowly all the way round the outside.’ ‘Don’t be afraid of things because they’re easy to do.’ ‘Only a part, not the whole.’ ‘Retrace your steps.’ ‘Disconnect from desire.’ ‘You are an engineer.’ ‘Turn it upside down.’ ‘Do we need holes?’ ‘Is it finished?’ ‘Don’t break the silence.’ ‘What are you really thinking about just now?’” *NME interviews*, 3 December 1977, <https://www.webcitation.org/5kJBbyRU5?url=http://www.bowiegoldenyears.com/heroes.html>, consulted on January 21, 2020.

you add, in Britain, in the late Seventies, a traditional Japanese instrument to a pop/rock song? Does it endow the instrument with a new status? Did Japanese people hear it differently afterwards? Conversely, what impact did its presence have on the song itself? Did Western listeners identify the instrument when they heard it? Did it contribute to making this pop/rock song more acceptable to a large audience, or, on the contrary, did it enhance its experimental (and thus, one can assume, underground) quality? And finally, should we ask ourselves whether “Moss Garden” is still a pop/rock song?

A second, perhaps less obvious, entry point might be “Crystal Japan”, an instrumental single released in 1980. It was used in a Japanese commercial for Crystal Jun Rock shōchū, (an alcoholic beverage similar to sake), in which Bowie starred, and which was shot, at Bowie’s request, at Shoden-ji temple, in Kyoto. The relative obscurity of the song implies that it cannot qualify for an unambiguous position in the mainstream. But being featured in a commercial, it was seen and heard by hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of Japanese people. Does this make it mainstream in Japan, and underground in the West? Does the category depend on the number of viewers, or the nature of the song? Should we adopt naturalist, essentialist definitions of the concepts, or more sociological ones?

Once one is inside Bowie’s world, his frequent, intense, and early connections with Japan soon become obvious. Bowie toured Japan extensively on several occasions: in 1973 (Tokyo, Kyoto, Kobe, Hiroshima, Osaka, Nagoya), 1978 (Osaka, Tokyo), 1983 (Tokyo, Kyoto, Yokohama, Osaka, Nagoya), 1990 (Tokyo), 1996 (Tokyo, Osaka, Fukuoka, Nagoya, Hiroshima, Kokura), and one last time in 2004 (Tokyo, Osaka). By the time of his first tour, Bowie was already so popular in Japan that a huge poster (the largest in the world at the time) hung from a Tokyo building.³ Apart from touring the country for concerts, Bowie visited Japan frequently, including for his honeymoon with his wife Iman Abdulmajid. At one point, he even mentioned to journalists the possibility of moving permanently to Kyoto, where he had spent several weeks in 1979 at Togendo, the home of David Kidd, an American Sinologist. His last stay in the country was in 2004.

We could easily draw a long list of Bowie’s references to Japanese culture. “Blackout”, on *Heroes* (1977), makes it clear: “I’m under Japanese influence”. Bowie alludes to spending a night in Kyoto in “Move on”, on *Lodger* (1979). 1980 marks the acme of his Japanophilia. The album *Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps)* opens with actress Michi Hirota screaming lyrics in Japanese on “It’s No Game (N° 1)”.⁴ Another song, “Ashes to Ashes,” mentions “pictures of Jap girls in synthesis.” Later, Bowie referenced Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima by name on the song “Heat” (*The Next Day*, 2013), when referring to a dead dog that appears in one of his novels, *Spring Snow*:

Then we saw
Mishima’s dog
Trapped between the rocks
Blocking the waterfall.

Bowie often spoke of his interest in Mishima writings. He even painted his portrait. On a famous picture taken in his apartment in Berlin, Bowie is seen taking a nap on a couch under the painting. Certainly, Mishima’s trajectory (his extreme political opinions and his dramatic

³ His popularity in Japan has to be contrasted with his relative obscurity in nearby Korea, which was at the time ruled by dictatorship and with a strong American military presence, two features which prevented British artists from being popular to the extent they were in Japan.

⁴ Incidentally, Hirota is featured on the cover of the 1974 album by the Sparks, *Kimono My House*.

suicide) and his writings cannot be labeled as mainstream. What about their mention in a pop song? Does it only serve to enhance Bowie's status, his "coolness"? Might it not backfire, turning him into a cultural snob, dropping obscure (for a Western pop audience) names that only the intelligentsia would respond to?

Of even greater public impact, though more ambiguous, is Bowie's participation as Major Jack Celliers in the 1983 movie *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, directed by Nagisa Oshima. One of his partners in the movie was Ryuichi Sakamoto, the famous Japanese musician, actor, and dancer, who also wrote the iconic song "Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence" for the movie's soundtrack, and with whom Bowie developed a friendship. However, Bowie's involvement in the movie cannot be considered as a step toward integrating Japanese culture into his universe, but rather the opposite.

But instead of compiling a long and tedious list of odd facts and details, it will be more fruitful to investigate Bowie's ties to Japan through four figures who shaped his relationship to the country.⁵

The first is Lindsay Kemp, who provided Bowie with his earliest artistic contact with Japan when he enrolled in his London Dance Centre in 1967. Kemp was familiar with Japanese cinema and theater. Thanks to him, Bowie became acquainted with noh and kabuki make-up and dance practices, and with movies such as Teinosuke Kinugasa's silent masterpiece, *A Page of Madness* (1926).⁶ In 1978, during an interview for the Japanese TV show *Star Sen Ichiya*, Bowie explained how kabuki taught him "the discipline of movement".⁷ Thanks to Kemp, Bowie discovered the music of Toru Takemitsu,⁸ which was used often during the dance classes. Kemp also introduced Bowie to Buddhism.⁹

Bowie's second major connection with Japan is photographer Masayoshi Sukita. Sukita's first encounter with Bowie was through his image, which he saw on a promotional poster in London. He managed to secure a meeting, followed by a shooting session in the summer of 1972. Bowie and Sukita subsequently started a 40-year long collaboration. The most famous work they did together took place in Tokyo's Harajuku Studio in 1977, while Bowie was in Japan to promote Iggy Pop's *The Idiot* (1977), an album he had produced and which had just been released. Sukita sent a selection of the photographs he had taken to Bowie, who later selected one for the celebrated cover of *Heroes*. At the time, Bowie was living in Berlin, where he had discovered the works of the *Die Brücke* movement, which includes artists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Emil Nolde, and Erich Heckel, all hailed as outstanding representatives of German Expressionism. Two works by Heckel, a painting and a woodcut entitled *Roquairol* (1917), became the inspiration behind the famous pose on the iconic cover (and for its reworking for *The Next Day*, 2013). Bowie readily recognizes the source: "*Heckel's Roquairol [...] was a major influence on me as a painter. [For the cover of*

⁵ Chris Mitchell, "David Bowie's Kyoto." <https://www.insidekyoto.com/david-bowie-kyoto>, consulted on January 21, 2020.

⁶ This movie was itself influenced by German Expressionism, a style which had a strong, repeated impact on Bowie's tastes. It can be found online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTc-CE8NWPw>.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ys10OajhV4Y>. Consulted on January 21, 2020.

⁸ Takemitsu is particularly well-known for his soundtracks of many Akira Kurosawa's movies.

⁹ Bowie's interest in Buddhism was such that at one point, after spending time in 1969 at Samye Ling monastery in Dumfriesshire, Scotland, he seriously considering becoming a monk. : "I was a terribly earnest Buddhist at the time [...] I suddenly realised how close it all was: another month and my head would have been shaved". Quoted in Peter Doggett, *The Man Who Sold The World: David Bowie and the 1970s*, London, Vintage, 2012, p. 45.

“Heroes”] it was *Heckel*”.¹⁰ The same painting had already inspired the photograph taken by Andy Kent for, in point of fact, the cover of Iggy Pop’s *The Idiot*. Sukita also had the opportunity on numerous occasions to photograph Bowie during his stays in Japan, in relaxed, everyday environments (food stalls, the underground, telephone booths, etc.), where Bowie could enjoy a normal life, without being recognized.

The third major encounter was with fashion designer Kansai Yamamoto. In May 1971, Yamamoto presented a collection at the Great Gear Trading Company, on the King’s Road in London, the first time a Japanese designer displayed his work outside Japan. Bowie saw the show and he immediately bought an item for the Ziggy persona he was building up at the time, a piece that subsequently became known as the “Woodland Creatures” outfit. The following year, Bowie contacted the designer through Yasuko Takahashi, a stylist who had already enabled him to purchase some of his clothes. The designer remembers:

I actually had no idea who David Bowie was until I saw him wearing my clothes onstage at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. Takahashi, my stylist, was doing work for David Bowie and gave him some of my clothes. This was the first time I had ever met an artist who was wearing my designs.¹¹

At Bowie’s request, he subsequently designed the outstanding costumes for his upcoming 1973-74 Aladdin Sane tours.

Thanks to Yamamoto, Bowie also became familiar with devices typical of kabuki. During plays, stagehands (*kuroko*) dressed in black assist the actors in changing their costumes very quickly (the *hayagawari* technique). Sometimes, these changes imply that a first layer of costume is removed very fast, by means of pulling a couple of threads, to reveal a second one beneath, supposedly the true nature of the character. Bowie used this *hikinuki* (or *bukkaeri*) technique to dramatic effect, wearing for instance a black or white outfit, and suddenly appearing in full color clothes. Yamamoto was also instrumental in designing Bowie’s red hairdo, reminiscent of the red lion (*shishi*) wig used in kabuki shows.

Finally, he introduced Bowie to famed kabuki actor Tamasaburō Bandō V who taught him how to apply kabuki make-up, something he had already tried in his Lindsay Kemp days. Bandō is the fourth and last major figure to connect Bowie to Japanese culture. After carefully studying Bandō’s technique, for his following tours, Bowie would dust white rice powder he had found in Tokyo to create a base, on which he would draw a pattern in ruby-red blush in kabuki style. Bandō remembers:

In April 1973, when he came to Japan for his first tour here. Bowie was 26, and I had just turned 23. The memory is a little indistinct, but I think he told me that he wanted to see me putting on make-up. He came to my dressing room, sat behind me, and watched me intently as I did my face. The red shading off around my eyes must have seemed unusual to someone from abroad. But, thinking back, as well as recognizing kabuki as a classical form, he must have picked up on its aura of “performance”.¹²

¹⁰ *UNCUT*, October 1999, <https://www.webcitation.org/5kJBbyRU5?url=http://www.bowiegoldenyears.com/heroes.htm>. Consulted on January 21, 2020.

¹¹ Kazumi Asamura Hayashi, *Vice*, March 18, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qbekxm/some-cat-from-japan-0000228-v21n2.

¹² Tamasaburo Bando, *Culture*, No. 39, April 13, 2017, pp. 122-124.

Once again, Bowie introduces ancient, traditional practices most Japanese people are more or less familiar with, “a classical form” as Bando stresses, into British pop culture. Does this entitle kabuki to the label of “mainstream”? Did it change its nature and perception in Japan? Or did it, on the contrary, contribute to make Bowie more elite, avant-garde, or underground? What impact does using a “classical form” have on a pop practice?

Beyond art

Beyond the cultural borrowings we have mentioned, Japan left more intangible traces on Bowie, or at least, traces that have less to do with his artistic practices and more with his social impact. His encounters with Japan, be they sartorial or dramatic, become particularly relevant within the framework of his experimentations with gender codes.

When he met Yamamoto and Bandō, Bowie had already posed for photographer Michael Fish in a woman’s dress for the iconic cover of the British edition of *The Man Who Sold the World* (1971), and had thus begun to question and challenge the boundaries between genders, which he would keep on doing with “Rebel Rebel” on *Diamond Dogs* (1974). His appropriation of kabuki’s codes goes further in the same direction since kabuki, “by its very nature, it is a ‘gender-bending’ form.”¹³ Bandō, for instance, is an *onnagata*, a male actor playing a female role, as is the tradition in kabuki. Using Yamamoto’s clothes, originally designed for women, can also be interpreted along these lines. Even if most Westerners were not aware of their initial purpose,¹⁴ the feminine touch added by the Japanese designer’s clothes enhanced Bowie’s gender ambiguity. Yamamoto clearly perceived his costumes as expanding Bowie’s experimentations:

At the time, David Bowie was all about transcending gender. I didn’t know anything about concepts like that, so I remember thinking ‘whoa’ when I saw him wearing clothes I had designed for women [...] He is neither man nor woman, if you know what I mean. Which suited me as a designer.¹⁵

As Frédéric Aubrun and Chloé Monin conclude, “Par cette surenchère d’effets visuels et de maniérisme *mis en avant par Bowie [...] c’est une identité transgenre, presque irréelle, qui est ici construite*”.¹⁶

Gender ambiguity was strengthened by Bowie’s statements to the press about his (claimed) bisexuality. In an interview given to the *Melody Maker*, he famously stated: “*I’m gay [...] and always have been, even when I was David Jones*”.¹⁷ The interviewer, Michael Watts, added:

¹³ “David Bowie... Pop Goes Kabuki”, *Toshimada*, November 23, 2010, <https://toshidama.wordpress.com/2010/11/23/david-bowie-pop-goes-kabuki/>, consulted February 3, 2020.

¹⁴ Some of Yamamoto’s original designs also had their roots in German Expressionism, as is the case for the spiral pants Bowie used on stage, which were originally designed by Oskar Schlemmer for his *Triadisches Ballett* in 1922, before Yamamoto revisited them for his models featured in *Harpers & Queen* July 1971 edition.

¹⁵ Kazumi Asamura Hayashi, *Vice*, March 18, 2014, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/qbekxm/some-cat-from-japan-0000228-v21n2.

¹⁶ “Through this accumulation of visual effects and mannerism put forward by Bowie [...] it is a transgender identity, almost unreal, that is constructed”, Frédéric Aubrun, Chloé Monin, “Bowie : un regard sémiologique sur une œuvre iconographique postmoderne”, *Volume !*, 14 : 1 | 2017, 140.

¹⁷ Michael Watts, “Bowie: ‘I’m gay and always have been’”, *The Melody Maker*, January 22, 1972.

He knows that in these times it's permissible to act like a male tart. [...] "Why aren't you wearing your girl's dress today?" I said to him. [...] "Oh dear," he replied, "You must understand that it's not a woman's. It's a man's dress".

Bowie used more outrageous, and thus, probably less credible words in his September 1976 *Playboy* interview with Cameron Crowe, alluding to Japan from an unusual, gendered perspective:

It's true — I am a bisexual. [...] And now the only time it tempts me is when I go over to Japan. There are such beautiful looking boys over there. Little boys? Not *that* little. About 18 or 19. [...] They're all queens until they reach 25, then suddenly they become samurai, get married and have thousands of children. I love it.¹⁸

Once again, we can wonder about the impact of Bowie's words and actions. To what extent is his flaunting of bisexuality and androgyny by means of Japanese theatrical, and sartorial practices a case of mainstreaming these issues, literally taking them out of their closet? Hasn't it, on the contrary, contributed to making the artist less accessible to a middle-of-the-road, conservative, prudish audience?

Mark Easton has a clear opinion on the subject. In 2016, he stated:

[The] questioning of sexual norms [has] shaped modern Britain. Britain has become far more tolerant of difference. And David Bowie helped us reach that place. [...] Would gay rights, gender equality legislation or same-sex marriage have enjoyed the broad support they do today without Bowie's androgynous challenge all those years ago? I suspect not. He gave space to oddity... and made it cool.¹⁹

Easton's words are interesting in that they underline a connection between Bowie's gender bending attitude (for which we have identified Japanese culture as a key ingredient), and the mainstreaming of gender and sexual issues in British society. But is he right?

Some elements of Japanese culture highlighted by Bowie also connect to "*a rebellious streak and unwillingness to conform to cultural norms*",²⁰ two elements that have been central to the social and aesthetic construction of rock music. Such is obviously the case of his interest for controversial novelist Mishima, or for the extravagant, flamboyant and outrageous "*basara*" style of Yamamoto's designs. The kabuki *basara* aesthetic of "*visual excess*", its "*garish juxtaposition of colours*"²¹ resonated with Bowie's nonconformity and trickled into the mainstream popular culture he helped define.²²

¹⁸ Cameron Crowe, "Interview: David Bowie", *Playboy*, September 1976.

¹⁹ Mark Easton, "Bowie: the creative force who changed Britain", *BBC News*, January 12, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-35290677>, consulted January 28, 2020.

²⁰ Alec Banks, "The 4 Japanese Luminaries Who Helped Shape David Bowie's Signature Look & Sound", *Highsnobiety*, January 12, 2017, <https://www.highsnobiety.com/2017/01/12/david-bowie-japan-kansai-yamamoto/>.

²¹ "David Bowie... Pop Goes Kabuki", *Toshimada*, November 23, 2010, <https://toshidama.wordpress.com/2010/11/23/david-bowie-pop-goes-kabuki/>, consulted February 3, 2020.

²² Kabuki now appears in many works of Japanese popular culture, such as *anime*.

If we understand the difference between the underground and the mainstream as the difference between what is available to a few, and what is available to many, Bowie is thus clearly mainstreaming Japanese culture, or least a few specific elements of this culture. And this is true, to a certain extent, for the Japanese audience itself, since the traditions he toyed with belong to an elite culture.²³ But Bowie's appropriation of practices little known outside Japan may also have made his art less understandable and approachable, a product of the avant-garde rather than a component of popular culture.

There are obvious limitations to the mainstreaming hypothesis. The most obvious one is that most people in the West did not identify Bowie's explorations as originating from Japan. Only recently has the general or specialized press focused on the Japanese connections, particularly in the wake of the *David Bowie Is* 2013 exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Historian Helene Marie Thian was instrumental in this recent acknowledgment, from her early presentation in 2012, at a symposium in Limerick, Ireland, to her interviews of Lindsay Kemp and her contribution to the collective opus *David Bowie, Critical Perspectives*.²⁴ Besides, one could claim that what became truly mainstream were not Bowie's experimentations with Japanese culture, but what less adventurous, less original, but perhaps more "commercial" artists did with them, in various fields. In that case, "mainstream" would apply not only to what is visible by the many, but also to what is easy to access, and not too demanding in terms of cultural codes. We need to develop these issues more at length.

Main and underground streams

We first need to clarify what is generally understood by "mainstream" and "underground". In 1980, George Gerbner and his team (Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli) defined the concept of mainstreaming in an article on television as follows: "*the expression of a commonality of outlooks and values*",²⁵ "a commonality" which they detected especially among heavy viewers (at the time, more than 4 hours a day). For Gerbner thus, mainstreaming implies a leveling process. Indeed, the commercial imperatives of television require the support of the widest possible audience; differences of taste and opinion must therefore be reduced as much as possible in order to obtain an "average" type of programs, governed by a few common denominators. Furthermore, in terms of political impact, Gerbner not only identified mainstreaming as "*a narrowing of political differences*" but also "*a significant tilt*" towards conservative positions.²⁶ He added: "*Converging technologies fill the mainstream with a single perspective*".²⁷

However, in music, mainstreaming has been conceived less as a leveling process than as the absorption, the "uploading" of marginal, underground practices into mass consumption. The process has been described by Robert Burnett as follows: "*Music often becomes mainstream only after an earlier incarnation as a counterculture genre*".²⁸ A musical style, or a specific

²³ Tickets for kabuki performances can easily reach 100 or 200 euros.

²⁴ Helene Marie Thian, "Moss Garden: David Bowie and Japonism in fashion in the 1970s", in Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J. Power, eds., *David Bowie, Critical Perspectives*, New York, Routledge, 2015, pp. 128-143.

²⁵ George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli, "The 'mainstreaming' of America: Violence Profile n° 11", *Journal of Communication*, 30 (3), pp. 10-19, 1980.

²⁶ George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli, "Charting the Mainstream: Television's Contributions to Political Orientations", *Journal of Communication* 32(2), 1982, republished in *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, Donal Lazère ed., Berkeley, UCLA Press, 1996, p. 443.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 446.

²⁸ Robert Burnett, *Global Jukebox: The International Music Industry*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 83.

artist, developing in the margins of the musical market for aesthetic, ethnic, or sexual reasons, succeeds in seducing a few teenagers in search of exclusive signs of identity. The group of fans eventually becomes sufficiently large to convince the record industry that the given style could be offered to the general public with, or without, sonic and/or lyrical alterations. Once absorbed into the mainstream, however, the genre often loses its alluring “difference” and is rejected by a new wave of teenagers who choose to adopt a more confidential, challenging one. The first official occurrence of the “mainstream” label applied to such a combination of familiar and more challenging stylistic features dates back to the Fifties. Jazz writer and producer Stanley Dance used it to describe a type of jazz between traditional Dixieland and bebop.²⁹ The term thus originally encompassed a dose of modernity, almost avant-garde.

Such was the first musical “mainstream”: cautious borrowings from the musical practices of minorities that the record industry would sometimes (though less and less frequently) calibrate for a mass audience by erasing lyrical or sonic particularities deemed unpalatable for a mass audience. For decades, there was thus a clear contrast (at least temporal and chronological) between what was called “the underground” and what belonged to “the mainstream”. The most common criteria to distinguish the two concepts were qualitative and quantitative. They referred both to specific aesthetic styles with clearly identifiable contents, and to the commercial appeal of specific genres. Still today, the Wikipedia “Underground” page provides a definition that combines both criteria:

Underground Music comprises musical genres beyond mainstream culture. Any song that is not being legally commercialized is considered underground. [...] Underground music may tend to express common ideas, such as high regard for sincerity and intimacy, freedom of creative expression as opposed to the highly formulaic composition of commercial music, and appreciation of artistic individuality as opposed to conformity to current mainstream trends.³⁰

Similarly, Belgian musicologist Christophe Pirenne uses “mainstream” to imply a capacity to sell, and reach a mass audience (“*des musiques qui plaisent à tous*”³¹), without taking risks or using stylistic innovations, but also as a style *per se*. In his excellent *Une histoire musicale du rock*, several sections covering different eras, are subtitled “Mainstream”. They are devoted to specific genres, and may include artists, who, depending on the nature of their production, are in other chapters considered as part of the underground or the avant-garde.

When the first punk bands emerged, however, the relationship between the two concepts began to change. Punk’s underground, unconventional, and shocking character was precisely what appealed to the mainstream media, the crucial ingredient of its success. “*Punk was not separate from mainstream morality and culture, but symbiotic with it*” writes John Street.³² Punk, more than a form of underground rebellion against mainstream culture, was its parasite, a saprophyte simultaneously feeding on it and transforming it. To a certain extent, punk became mainstream by stressing and highlighting its underground nature. Consequently, it is difficult to observe with punk the same process we described earlier.

²⁹ Stanley Dance even released records under the collective title “Mainstream Jazz”.

³⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground_music, consulted January 28, 2020.

³¹ “Music that can please anyone”, Christophe Pirenne, *Une histoire musicale du rock*, Paris, Fayard, 2011, p. 415.

³² John Street, “Shock Waves: the Authoritative Response to Popular Music”, *Come On Down? Popular Media Culture in Post-War Britain*, Dominic Strinati & Stephen Wagg, eds., London, Routledge, 1992, p. 315.

Since then, the understanding of what is “mainstream” has evolved. The distinction between the two terms has become less relevant since art forms that initially develop in the “underground”, now become immediately “mainstream”. According to Martin Raymond:

You once had a series of gatekeepers in the adoption of a trend: the innovator, the early adopter, the late adopter, the early mainstream, the late mainstream, and finally the conservative. But now it goes straight from the innovator to the mainstream.³³

Thus, an artist like Billie Eilish can be officially lionized almost immediately after her first exposure online. The classic margin/center dichotomy no longer holds. What Lawrence Grossberg wrote as early as 1988 has now become even more manifest: “*Today’s fan [...] is neither mainstream nor underground but everywhere*”.³⁴

Conclusion

Bowie’s artistic approach has been instrumental in this convergence. Clearly, the analysis suggested by Kenneth Goldsmith that “*literature has remained on two parallel tracks, the mainstream and the avant-garde, with the two rarely intersecting*”³⁵ does not seem to apply to music. In music, they do intersect, as is demonstrated by Bowie. His connection with Japan, indeed, highlights a global, postmodern³⁶ strategy aiming at bringing together in a seamless whole usually contradictory elements: the high and the low, the here and the there, the traditional and the avant-garde, the classical and the popular, the underground and the mainstream.

In turn, the fusion Bowie performed in his art has trickled down into mainstream practices, including in Japan. A few random examples are the following : the cover of *Irara*, a 1980 manga by Kazuo Umezu, was inspired by Bowie’s kabuki style *Pin Ups* (1973) sleeve; several collections created in the 2000s by Dolce & Gabbana, Dior, or Jean-Paul Gaultier were directly borrowed from Kansai Yamamoto 1970s designs for Bowie; recently, Masumi Ishikawa has produced two modern *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints) featuring iconic pictures of Bowie fused with elements of kabuki. Traces so numerous that for Arnaud Vaulerin, Bowie is a contemporary avatar of Japonism, the movement initiated in the second half of the 19th century by artists such the Goncourt brothers and the impressionist painters, exerting an influence equal to the one these artists had on their epoch, but a 20th century avatar, “*transfigured by pop culture*”.³⁷

³³ Quoted in Tim Walker, “Meet the global scenester: He’s hip. He’s cool. He’s everywhere”. *The Independent*, August 14, 2008, <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/fashion/features/meet-the-global-scenester-hes-hip-hes-cool-hes-everywhere-894199.html>, consulted January 28, 2020.

³⁴ Lawrence Grossberg, “You (Still) Have to Fight Your Right to Party: Music Television as Billboard of Post-modern Difference”, *Popular Music*, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1988, p. 319.

³⁵ Kenneth Goldsmith, “It’s Not Plagiarism. In the Digital Age, It’s ‘Repurposing’”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 11, 2011, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Uncreative-Writing/128908>, consulted on February 4, 2020.

³⁶ Indeed, according to its classic definition, *[La culture postmoderne] s’accompagne du mélange de valeurs contradictoires, de la juxtaposition d’attitudes qui étaient auparavant opposées* (“[Postmodern culture] incorporates a blending of contradictory values, the juxtaposition of previously opposing attitudes”) Frédéric Aubrun et Chloé Monin, “Bowie : un regard sémiologique sur une œuvre iconographique postmoderne”, *Volume !*, 14 : 1 | 2017, 137-149.

³⁷ Arnaud Vaulerin, “Derrière le Bowie hermaphrodite, l’importance de la culture nipponne”, *Libération*, January 11, 2016.

However, the nature of the intersection actuated by Bowie is quite unique in the pop world. He does not only insert into the pop idiom elements that initially did not belong to it. He does not only make the mainstream more experimental, and the underground more accessible. He is one of the very few artists Pirenne identifies as belonging to both categories simultaneously: “*David Bowie [...] fut l’un des seuls à conserver la popularité d’un artiste mainstream tout en se livrant à des expérimentations dont allaient se réclamer nombre d’artistes attachés aux nouvelles vagues*”.³⁸ Neither edulcorating his style, nor spicing it up, Bowie, at his (Japanese) best, is both radically adventurous and extremely popular, the perfect embodiment of what Douglas Wolk wrote about the 1980 album *Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps)*: “It was one of the most avant-garde/avant-rock, convention-defying records of his career [...] Even so, *Scary Monsters* worked just fine as pop music”.³⁹ Thanks to David Bowie, we can now all be “cats from Japan.”

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³⁸ “David Bowie [...] was one of the few who maintained the popularity of a mainstream artist while experimenting in ways that many new-wave artists would claim to have done”, Christophe Pirenne, *Une histoire musicale du rock*, Paris, Fayard, 2011, p. 358.

³⁹ Douglas Wolk, “How David Bowie’s ‘Scary Monsters’ Turned Avant-Rock Into Chart-Topping Pop. At the dawn of the MTV Eighties, Bowie radically transformed his sound and image”, *Rolling Stone*, September 12, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/how-david-bowies-scary-monsters-turned-avant-rock-into-chart-topping-pop-121686/>, consulted on February 6, 2020.

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