***SILHOUETTES AND SHADOWS. THE SECRET HISTORY OF DAVID BOWIE'S SCARY MONSTERS (AND SUPER CREEPS), ADAM STEINER (2023)***

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*Reviewed by Rupert Loydell, Falmouth University*

This is a rambling, digressionary and unfocussed exploration of David Bowie's unnerving 1980 hit album *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*. It travels forwards and backwards (and sideways) in time, offers social and historical context, biographical details, authorial opinion, review excerpts, snippets from new interviews with musicians involved at the time as well as critics, writers and Bowie experts, and deconstructions and explorations of individual tracks, each of which gets a chapter to itself. It's gloriously readable and informative, the book's loose shape an appropriate response to an album which, although more focussed than *Lodger* (Bowie's previous album (1979), which was regarded as an unsatisfactory end to the Berlin trilogy, despite not being recorded or written there), Steiner posits *Scary Monsters* as the product of 'Bowie at a personal and professional crossroads' (2023, back cover blurb).

Having said how interesting and informative this books is, and whilst acknowledging this does not claim to be an academic volume, let me get a few negative responses out of the way before I continue to sing my praises. Firstly, the numerous 'Fragments' by the author which appear to be raw, mostly unedited, dull cut-ups (the acknowledgement to 'The Lazarus Corporation' on page 78, suggests he uses the same online cut-up engine I do for creating and disrupting poems) are simply not needed. They have none of the verve or associative surprise of Bowie's lyrics, cut-up or not. My main problem with this book though is the rather half-hearted attempt at referencing. The numbered footnotes go out of sync with the numbers in the text at times, or are simply irrelevant; when quotations are cited they are non-specific and do not include page numbers where appropriate; and quotations used as epigraphs or section dividers are for some reason centred and italicised. The bibliography, here called 'Sources' (271-76) is broken up into different sections rather than presented as one alphabetical list; does not include all the publication details I would expect, nor a discography; and there is absolutely no information about the list of names under the heading 'Personal Contact—E-mail and Interview' on page 271. It's a shame because it is so close to being usefully and carefully formatted.

Anyway, enough academic obsessing and angst... As I said above, this is an enjoyable and informative book, full of surprises and unexpected comments and critical revelations. According to Steiner, the album is made post experimental phase but pre the pop phase that would come next. RCA were unhappy with Bowie's Eno-influenced albums and suggested a return to the soul of *Young Americans* (Bowie 1975) which had preceded them, despite critical acclaim and eventual sales for *Low* (Bowie 1977a) and *"Heroes"* (Bowie 1977b) if not so much for *Lodger* (Bowie 1979). Bowie was still struggling with on/off addictions, despite his Berlin sojourn to get clean, and busy rethinking where he might musically go next.

Steiner suggests that the ghosts of Ziggy and Major Tom, perhaps glam rock in general, still haunted Bowie, and that *Scary Monsters* is partly about putting musical stakes through their heart, most obviously on 'Ashes to Ashes' (Bowie 1980: 4) in relation to the lost space cadet. (Of course, as we know, it didn't quite work: Major Tom would insist upon one final appearance on the title track of ★ (*Blackstar*), Bowie's final album in 2016.) It is also about faith and direction, particularly on 'Kingdom Come', the cover version of a Tom Verlaine song; and an unsure discussion of 'Fashion', Bowie wondering whether to embrace it (which he would a few years later) or not.

In a similarly undecided manner, *Scary Monsters* (Bowie 1980) is a multi-faceted album offering a wide range of stylistic musical choices, in some ways similar to the tracks on *Lodger* (Bowie 1979), though without the travelogue concept. If the krautrock and ambient explorations of *Low* (Bowie 1977a) and *"Heroes"* (Bowie 1977b) are absent, Robert Fripp's various searing guitar solos are partly a continuation of the disruptive, intrusive and powerful guitar work – not always by Fripp – sometimes present on these albums but also a major constituent of *Station to Station* (Bowie 1976), my favourite Bowie album. Urged by Bowie to 'Think Ritchie Blackmore' (Fripp in Steiner 2023: 40), Fripp was – according to Steiner – able to 'destablize and enrich the work of his fellow musicians' on 'Up The Hill Backwards' (Bowie 1980: 2) and, 'unmoor the song, taking it towards strange new territories.' (Steiner 2023: 40)

Somehow, despite this kind of abstracted, intrusive (yet very wonderful) guitar work throughout the album, the guttural Japanese vocals and Bowie's desperate scream to stop the guitar solo on 'It's No Game (Part 1)' (Bowie 1980: 1), Chuck Hammond's strange guitar synth and Andy Clark's Moog on 'Ashes to Ashes' (Bowie 1980: 4), not to mention the track's postapocalyptic video (Mallett 1980) with it's bulldozer-threatened earthlings on a solarised beach beneath a black sky, and the self-interrupting, self-questioning and self-mocking 'Fashion' (Bowie 1980: 5), not only did the *Scary Monsters* (Bowie 1980) sell, but produced hit singles.

For a while the desire for hit singles and popular success, as opposed to experiment or sincerity, seemed to take over Bowie and it wasn't until *Outside* (Bowie 1995), an awkward and mostly unloveable collaboration with Eno, that he chose to step outside the pop marketplace he had ensconced himself in post *Scary Monsters* (Bowie 1980). Although many, including myself, like Bowie's subversion and appropriation of drum'n'bass and electronica on *Earthling* (Bowie 1997), and others prefer the art rock of *Heathen* (Bowie 2002), fans and critics were not united in their acclaim until the surprise release of *The Next Day* (Bowie 2013) and the posthumous *Blackstar* (Bowie 2016).

In 1980, however, according to Steiner, Bowie was '[e]xhausted by the atrophy of mass communication, being known, beloved, and often misunderstood, where songs are seen as imitations of one's own life'. *'Scary Monsters* would stand as an opportunity to look both forward and backward at the same time', and the album 'remains a key moment in David Bowie's brilliant adventure toward some better place.' (Steiner 2023: 223) The better place would, of course, involve Bowie falling to earth and learning to live like others (albeit wealthy others), and eventually returning to making the innovative and subversive music he had once been renowned for, rather than the hit singles which – along with the sales of his back catalogue – helped fill his coffers. Steiner takes inspiration from all of this, ending the main part of his book by stating that 'David Bowie went further out than most—and inspired us to dream that maybe we could go there too.' (Steiner 2023:2024) This wide-ranging, eclectic, ill-disciplined and unruly book can only help us be inspired.

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**CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Rupert Loydell is senior lecturer in the School of Writing and Journalism at Falmouth University. He is a widely published poet and has written about Brian Eno, David Lynch, Cabaret Voltaire, Nurse with Wound, Christian rock, collaboration, pedagogy and creative writing for academic journals and books.

Contact: Falmouth University, Woodlane, Falmouth, Cornwall, TR11 4RH, UK. E-mail: rupert.loydell@falmouth.ac.uk

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2730-8489

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