On 10 January 2016, David Bowie died in New York aged 69, two days after the release of his final album, *Blackstar*, but some 50 years since his first releases. When iconic individuals die, it prompts us reflect on the significance of their lives and work. However, few of Bowie’s obituaries have focused on the social and sociological significance of his career.

One way to consider Bowie’s sociological significance is to think about whether he can be seen as a pioneering postmodern artist. According to Kathryn Johnson (2015), Bowie actually considered himself in these terms, mixing high and popular cultures, and borrowing from different art forms. There are certainly aspects of his work that point in this direction.

**A master of reinvention**

David Bowie seems to fit the postmodern view of identity as fluid and flexible (Bauman 1996). From this point of view, individuals are unconstrained by their backgrounds and can change their identities at will. Bowie has been described as chameleon-like — a master of self-reinvention. At certain points in his career he created new characters and identities for himself. The most famous example is Ziggy Stardust, an otherworldly bisexual rock star (Erlewine 2016). Another of his personae was the Thin White Duke, an enigmatic character based on the alien he portrayed in the film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976).

**Sound and vision**

Bowie was also adept at overhauling his musical style. His early work has been described as ‘mod’ in its sound, influenced by traditional music-hall entertainment, but in later years he tried out a wide range of styles. Bowie’s music did not just draw on a single style but
often combined several different styles. Breaking down barriers between styles and creating new hybrids is often seen as a characteristic of postmodern popular culture (Strinati 1995). For example, the 1975 album *Station to Station* has been described as ‘a potent hybrid of sinewy funk and robotic beats’ (Spencer 2015) and the 1997 album *Earthling* as a mixture of techno and drum ‘n’ bass (Richards 2015).

It is also possible to detect in particular songs further features of postmodern culture. The interest in space travel and aliens could be linked to confusions over space and time, the tragic death of Major Tom in *Space Oddity* to scepticism about science, and the exploitation of Major Tom for advertising (the media wanted to know what make his shirts were) could be viewed as a comment on media-saturated postmodern consumerism.

**Androgyny and sexuality**

Another significant link between Bowie and postmodernism is the way in which he contributed to breaking down barriers between sexual identities. Many of his characters were androgynous, and Bowie himself often spoke about his bisexuality. If postmodernity is about de-differentiation — breaking down divisions between social groups and categories of people, then Bowie’s blurred sexuality may be one of the greatest contributions any rock star has made to postmodern culture.

One of the problems with theories of postmodern and popular culture is that they are open to multiple interpretations. This creates problems for making any definitive statements about whether an artist is ‘modern’ or ‘postmodern’. For example, postmodern culture is supposed to break down class barriers. Although Bowie was from quite a modest lower middle-class suburban background, he may have had a mainly middle-class appeal (Attfield 2015).

David Bowie may be an excellent example of a postmodern rock star, but he is also an example of how difficult it is to classify anything in terms of a simple contrast between modern and postmodern.