I’m Not a Film Star

Gesturing Dust

**5**

Gesturing Dust

Sensing David Bowie’s performance in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*

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**Introduction**

In this chapter I explore David Bowie’s performance as Major Jack Celliers in *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* through a sense-based, close textual analysis of a single scene. This scene appears near the end of the film, where Captain Yonoi (Ryuichi Sakamoto) orders all of the prisoners, including the sick and injured, to gather outside their barracks. When Group Captain Hicksley (Jack Thompson) refuses to obey these orders, Yonoi demands that he and other prisoner officers answer a question about the level of military skills in their camp. Hicksley refuses to answer and an enraged Yonoi has him dragged to a position where he is knelt and forcibly held, and prepares to behead him. Other Japanese soldiers/guards train their rifles on the prisoners so that they do not break rank. At this point in the scene, Celliers suddenly, if nonchalantly, walks past the guards and stands between Yonoi and Hicksley. Yonoi pushes Celliers backwards and to the floor, and he responds by kissing him on each cheek. Yonoi raises his katana only to collapse and fall to his knees. Celliers is then attacked and beaten by a number of Japanese soldiers. The scene under analysis lasts for three minutes and forty seconds.

I am centrally concerned with how David Bowie *affectively acts* in this scene, responding not exclusively to his star apparatus or wider cultural signifiers – although these play a central role – but to his movement, body language, gestures and ‘silences’. These gestures and silences – or linguistic gaps – allow his performance to register beyond representation, as an affective assemblage. There is an alienation to his performance in this scene that springs forth like a coil: affectively speaking, Bowie’s performance as Celliers registers as ulterior and unnameable. Further, what is being affectively enunciated in this scene is queer desire: a longing on the part of Yonoi, a liminality on the part of Celliers and of the star playing him. In addition, the asemiotic, aesthetic qualities of Bowie’s performance are analysed through the mise en scène, which is read as performative too. The textures and spaces of the screen, the costuming and the objects caressed, are seen as sensory forms, forming entangled connections with Celliers and the other characters.

My approach draws on both the traditions of close film textual analysis, as outlined by writers such V. F. Perkins[[1]](#endnote-1) and Andrew Kleven,[[2]](#endnote-2) and sensorial readings taken up in my own writing.[[3]](#endnote-3) The analysis of singular scenes has a long tradition in film studies: it is an approach that demands we spend quality time with the fictional world, closely allowing its meanings and impressions to emerge, shot by shot.

I have chosen to analyse this scene for three reasons. First, the scene is literally and metaphorically the ‘climax’ of Yonoi and Celliers’s homoerotically charged relationship and, as such, is wetted with affective qualities. Second, the scene teasingly delays its introduction of Celliers, of David Bowie, but constantly gestures towards his arrival. In a sense, Celliers/Bowie is there and not there in the scene. Finally, the scene centrally functions through non-verbal gestures, and it is these non-linguistic properties that ‘speak’ the unnameable that I think drive the impressions and sensations of the scene. Of course, as an actor, Bowie very often carries meaning in and through his non-normative body,[[4]](#endnote-4) and in this chapter I read his liminal corporeality through fine-grain analysis, from the text outwards. I *feel* or *screen-sense* David Bowie’s performance in what I will refer to as the *gesturing dust* scene from *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*.

**Gesturing Dust**

The scene begins with a three-second, low-angle profile shot of Yonoi. His face is taut, his eyes accusatory and his mouth begins to silently growl, opening up the scene to the way gesture – and in his case, animalistic gesture – will organize the events and interactions that will follow. Yonoi is captured against a verdant canopy of green trees, suggestive of the thick jungle that surrounds the camp, and that he too is a ‘prisoner’. The foliage also registers as a blanket of carnal humidity which seems to be eating its way into or through him: it swamps his body. After one second of screen time, non-diegetic sound enters the shot: a haunting set of notes that raises alarm and mournfully anchors the next shot it bleeds into.

The scene cuts to a slow, 23-second panning shot of the assembled prisoners, the camera positioned as if it is Yonoi’s point of view. Some of the prisoners stare directly back, returning the gaze, while others look at the ground or into dead space. A number of soldiers are holding up their sick or injured comrades who struggle to stand. There are also soldiers whose gait is strong and firm, their hands placed on their hips, resisting the gaze, rejecting the biopower imbalance that is being imposed upon them.

Many of the soldiers look emaciated: they bear cuts, bruises, wear bandages and their limbs are missing or crippled. Their clothes are caked in sweat and dirt, and bands of perspiration wet their chests, shoulders, faces and arms. We can feel the sun falling on them and the heat rising, transferring itself into dissipating chemical energy. This panning shot draws on non-linguistic signifiers – on decimated bodies and forlorn gestures – to register its meaning. This metonymic panning shot carries the full force of the horror and abjection of being a prisoner of war. These gestural bodies suggest psychic trauma, ‘indexing the agency of the unconscious’,[[5]](#endnote-5) enabling interior meaning to emerge through affective textures. What makes the shot even more powerful is the way it references other trauma images, and from the Holocaust in particular.[[6]](#endnote-6) Given we are positioned from Yonoi’s point of view, there is the uncomfortable sensation of being complicit in their trauma, as well as being silent witnesses to this horror show.

At the conclusion of this panning shot, we momentarily pause on two of the main protagonists in the film: Lieutenant Colonel John Lawrence (Tom Conti) and Celliers. Lawrence is one of the soldiers captured with his hand on his hips, returning and resisting Yonoi’s gaze. Celliers is positioned behind Lawrence, partially blocked by him, but he also stares back at Yonoi. Celliers wears a different uniform to everyone else, not only to authenticate his background as a South African British soldier but also, narratively speaking, to highlight his difference to everyone else, and to signify the star status of the actor, ‘David Bowie’. Celliers’s presence in this shot almost feels incidental, inconsequential, however. There is no attempt to foreground him; rather, he appears ghost-like, hauntological, there-but-not-there. Such interminability, of course, perfectly fits with Bowie’s star image, as one who ‘by permitting a fluid and playful encounter with gender and other facets of identity . . . enables others to activate their own propensity toward performative action’.[[7]](#endnote-7)

The next shot, an abrupt cut, finds Yonoi quickly moving away from the prisoners. The camera tracks Yonoi and the soldiers, who are in the foreground of the shot, advancing with speed and urgency. This tracking shot, lasting eight seconds, contains only diegetic sound: the urgent walking movements, swords clashing against legs and, at the end of the shot, some dialogue. Visually, the shot reveals more of the camp: where the Japanese soldiers are positioned; an army truck; and a tented structure. The camp is sparse and organized for maximum surveillance and social control.

The cut is immediately disorientating not only because of the shift in pace and the change in camera movement but also because there is seemingly no single act or action that precipitates it. Further, there is a simultaneous violence registered across these planes of movement: through Yonoi’s sharp, short strides; the way the soldiers mechanically move and crouch; and through the clothing and objects that are themselves pointed, honed, including his bamboo whip/cane, the Sen-bou or field hat and the Guntō or military sword.

However, the real force of the shot comes from its illegibility and the question of why Yonoi retreats so violently. On one level, his action can be read as the product of disgust: he finds the abject bodies of the prisoners disgusting, dishonourable, and so he rapidly moves, looks away, to dispel this feeling of nausea. The film has already established that Yonoi believes in the philosophy of the noble death and patriotic sacrifice, one which he was denied because he was unable to join the ‘Shining Young Officers’ who attempted a military coup. When it failed, the young officers were executed and, as we have already learnt, Yonoi feels the shame of not being there with them. The shame he feels is being conferred on the prisoners before him. Shame is ‘tied to perceived deficiencies of one’s core self . . . and is associated with more global and enduring negative attributions about oneself’.[[8]](#endnote-8)

On another level, however, his action can be read as another form of disgust: one that emanates from his repressed desire for Celliers, whose gaze, as I note above, he lands on as the previous shot concludes. Disgust is often met with ‘vile’ inner materials let out, or it transforms palettes: we vomit, let out gas, shit, piss or we just experience the sense or feeling of having contaminants on our lips, caking the insides of our mouths. Disgust is also cultural and ideological: it works off normative and moralistic assumptions about right and wrong and helps construct and secure power-saturated binary oppositions between insiders and outsiders.[[9]](#endnote-9) In terms of dominant discourse, this is particularly the case around sexuality, where anything that questions heterosexuality is – culturally and psychically – felt to be repellent. When Yonoi retreats from staring at Celliers, then, it is because of his feelings for him, which he finds nauseating. His violent flight from the prisoners on parade is actually a flight from his own desire.

Nonetheless, disgust can be seen to bring into sensory existence the very unregulated essences that it seeks to deny or repress. Disgust can also be understood as an anti-democratic force that opens up the body to new experiences and sensations that are usually denied expression.[[10]](#endnote-10) What is being set in motion in these two shots – the play between disgust and desire – takes a powerful hold of the scene a little later.

As this shot comes to a close, we hear Hicksley, out of view, call out Yonoi’s name, which makes him stop, turn and again face the prisoners. His angular pose, bony cheeks and grimace transmit a feeling of contempt, of his quiet rage. However, Yonoi’s cheeks are also toned, or gently blushed, and his pristine white gloves stand out against the dust and the sweat on his face and clothes. The white gloves seem ‘matter out of place’,[[11]](#endnote-11) but they also confirm Yonoi’s care for his self-appearance, for a purity of the self and, subtextually or subconsciously, for a longing for the Other. The gloves, his uniform, his cheek bones, all help to undermine the masculine, heterosexual script to which he is wedded. This contradiction between masculine and feminine, straight and gay, registers as the competing impulses that lie beneath the visible, the nameable. Yonoi is a gestural contradiction.

Of course, the white gloves also gesture towards David Bowie’s ‘Let’s Dance’ music video, released in the same year as the film. In that video, Bowie finds himself in the Australian outback, a messiah-like figure, who is able to produce music that liberates indigenous people from their settler oppression. In this scene from *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence*, his idealized whiteness, his blonde beauty, marks itself on/through Yonoi’s hands. Yonoi’s desire for Celliers (Bowie) is carried on and through the immaculate whiteness of his gloved fingers.

The next shot, three seconds in duration, is of Hicksley, initially crouched over a dead prisoner, rising to say, ‘He’s dead.’ Hicksley is captured in a medium shot, with three Japanese soldiers positioned behind and their rifles trained on him. Again, the green jungle acts as a stifling ecology, almost swallowing the Japanese soldiers, while acting as a penetrating visual relay. Hicksley looks towards Yonoi, side on, with the branches and palms leaning that way also. The oppressive mise en scène carries forward the very elements of the prisoner’s death that has just occurred and foreshadows the violence that is to come.

In the next shot, just under five seconds in duration, Yonoi is captured in close-up, an affect image, his face again registering disgust. He struggles to form words, his mouth first pursing and then ‘shaping’ words before they are spoken. The first sound that emerges from Yonoi’s mouth is guttural, as if what he wants to say is not possible to speak, a ‘speechless dwelling in language’.[[12]](#endnote-12) He is framed side-on: the sharp, forceful lines of his physique, face, cap and the collars of his uniform, almost granite in composition. As he raises his arm to gesture, he shouts ‘get over here’, almost speechless with rage. And yet again, Yonoi is also androgynous: a delicate beauty infuses these lines, this forced aggression, with a different set of gender codes. Shame bubbles beneath his skin: he can barely speak because of it. But he doesn’t really want to because:

Speak and you can be named a pervert or normal (even if perversion is celebrated). Remain silent and you are no longer a subject but a molecular dissipative desiring affectivity and potentiality.[[13]](#endnote-13)

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The scene then cuts to a position behind Yonoi, to see again what he is observing. Yonoi stands centre frame, facing the prisoners, who are collectively captured in long shot. Hicksley is also framed centrally, and the dead prisoner’s emaciated body is beside him. The line of men stretches across the entire film frame, repeating – albeit from a distance and in a still shot – the earlier composition. Death haunts the image, not only through what is represented but also because of the Holocaust allusions it draws upon.

Hicksley then walks towards Yonoi, the slowness of his movement in stark contrast to Yonoi’s stride and gait earlier. His are tired, weary steps. When Hicksley gets to a position where he is standing right in front of Yonoi, the camera begins to pan at the same time as Yonoi approaches a group of prisoner officers, to the right of the frame. Yonoi again moves with speed, and as he pushes between the officers, he picks four of them out, each representing a different area of the military. Yonoi returns to his position in front of Hicksley, and the other prisoner officers follow, standing next to Hicksley. One of the officers fixes his cap and then all of them stand to attention, embodying the protocols of the officer.

These officers are being positioned as gentlemen, in contrast to Yonoi, who is being racially Othered as savage and cruel. The officer’s civility empties them of violence, while Yonoi is filled up with it, echoing or reinforcing cultural stereotypes about the Japanese. The ‘gap’ between these two positions, however, emerges complexly, unevenly. This shot reveals that the prisoner officers are separated from the rest of the men: a hierarchy is in place, one cut across social class lines. However, what is most interesting about this shot is the way Celliers is again not at all focused upon: he is barely perceptible from the other officers. Yet he is *there*: his honey blonde hair ‘colouring’ the line-up, a figure symbolically foregrounded, then. He is *there* on Yonoi’s fingers, a translation and transference that undermines the usual white mastery relationship.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The scene then continues with a quick shot-reverse-shot between Yonoi and Hicksley, at close-up position, lasting five seconds in total. Yonoi’s face is animated by gestures, by his tongue rolling behind his closed mouth. He remains disgusted with Hicksley, his mouth is caked with it. Hicksley, wetted with sweat, stares into the distance, refusing the gaze, and the blue sky behind him creates a limitless horizon. When we then return to Yonoi, again in close-up, he struggles to ask Hicksley this question: ‘As a representative of the British Air Force, how many experts in weapons and guns do you have in your group?’ What is collectively happening across these shots is the building of Yonoi’s anger, rage and shame. However, this repression is, as noted above, doubly unconscious: his disgust for the men is also his disgust of self, of the latent desire that wells within him. He is also performing for and in front of Celliers, his actual intended ‘audience’ and love interest.

In the next two-second close-up shot, Hicksley responds with a firm, clipped, ‘none, sir’, and we return again to a close-up of Yonoi. In this shot, the attempt to form language, words, fails Yonoi again and he strikes the floor with his bamboo cane, its noise cracking open the silence. Yonoi eventually forms a guttural response, but this is accompanied by foreboding non-diegetic music, an electric hum that unsettles the scene and atonally translates the grunt. Such human gestures,

as utterances, are not always the product of conscious intent. Some gesticulations emerge unbidden. . . . Gestures, chattering ﬁngers in Christian’s circumstance, betray repressed memories.[[15]](#endnote-15)

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The next shot is seventeen seconds long: Yonoi moves away from the prisoner officers and towards the camera, flanked by two soldiers. However, his speed and urgency mean that within two seconds he is positioned off-screen, leaving the camera to witness Hicksley being grabbed and marched forward. This action is captured in a wide shot: we see the assembled prisoners behind Hicksley, as well as the other officers who have been lined up with him. Their barracks, the row of palm trees and the blue sky fill the shot with impressionable context.

As Hicksley is grabbed by two soldiers, the movement in the shot is forceful and yet irregular. Hicksley is propelled forward, albeit in a fitful way; the prisoners and the officers also briefly move or lurch forward, wanting to protect him, to intervene. As they do so, other Japanese soldiers fluidly move towards them, raising their bayonets. At the same time, the camera smoothly tracks backwards, mirroring Yonoi’s movements while keeping the advancing Hicksley central to the frame. Movement occurs, then, in two planes and with two levels of intensity and fluidity. The prisoner and officers’ movement are almost immediately arrested, and the gestures they make are resigned: symbolic acts of momentary resistance, crushed by the violence that would await them if they were to protest further. Collectively, they are being reduced to bare life.[[16]](#endnote-16) The shot is sonically anchored by the musical score, including a barely perceptible drum beat that accelerates as the shot unfolds; the diegetic sound of Hicksley’s feet, of soldiers’ feet; and the angry calls of the prisoners, one who shouts, ‘you Japanese bastards’. The axis of action slices through the scene’s movement image but also affectively foreshadows Celliers’s ghostly movement, one that will be eroticized later in the scene.

At the end of the shot, Hicksley is forced to kneel by the Japanese soldiers. He remains silent, a gesture of stoicism, carrying forward the associations of being gentlemanly. However, Hicksley bares his teeth, as do the soldiers, so that the sense that words are futile, or cannot be formed, again impregnates the shot. There is an animalization taking place. Yonoi now strides back into the frame, facing Hicksley and away from the camera. His katana sword is vertical to his waist, and his white-gloved right hand is tightly clenched. His movement registers like a coil about to spring, but also as someone who is erect and yet in denial of such detonation. Yonoi is a mass of contradictory energies that will shortly explode when Celliers enters the scene. In fact, there is a latent longing here for this to happen. This is a masochistic or self-loathing performance that calls out for his love interest in the film. Of course, the same will be true for Bowie fans: they – we – long for the moment when Celliers will directly enter the scene.

The next five-second shot frames Yonoi, again flanked by two soldiers, standing in front of Hicksley. Hicksley remains positioned submissively, at an angle that places his head at the level of Yonoi’s groin. The positioning looks like an act of fellatio is taking place. Yonoi grimaces, his face is contorted, as he again struggles to speak. The sense of disgust has now been fully transferred to the arena of unspeakable sexual desire. However, as the shot continues, Yonoi reaches for his katana and we watch him unsheathe it, drawing it vertically, sharply, across the screen, and we hear its lacerating sound as he does so. The action is precise, clean and becomes one of (un)intended sexual violence. As the shot ends, we see Hicksley shrink slightly, which is followed by a two-second close-up of his anguished face. One of the Japanese soldiers removes Hicksley’s hat, and Hicksley closes his eyes and lets out a slow, strangulated scream. In the same way that Yonoi has been unable to form words out of the shame he projects, so Hicksley loses the ability to speak as he imagines his own death. The primitivism, animalism of Hicksley’s screech shatters the narrative image. Of course, across this shot we see the flash of the katana cutting into the dead space between Yonoi and Hicksley: it is his head that is to be decapitated, the very organ that moments earlier was sucking Yonoi dry. This shot lays his/their perversity bare, and yet it is also a dramatic punctuation point in the scene, a device to allow the hero, the real love interest, to emerge from the wings. Celliers’s/Bowie’s arrival is surely only seconds away?

The scene then returns to a close-up of Yonoi, as he draws the katana to his face. In this seven-second shot, the blade is brought to rest against the peak of his cap, as we watch him silently incant the Bushido code. Graphically, the blade cuts the image down the middle, while it glistens with sunlight, igniting and animating its silver materiality. Yonoi is again surrounded by, and entangled with, the thick, fervent greenery, as if he is caught in its liana. The soundtrack’s volume has been raised and it now sonically registers as a million gnats or flies humming their insatiable hunger. The insectile enters the composition at the same time the shot intends to purify Yonoi, through this double gesturing of honour and sacrifice. The relative stillness at the end of this shot acts as a gestural bridge to the long-desired, but delayed arrival of Celliers/Bowie. We wait no more.

In the next shot we cut to a close-up shot of Celliers, the camera slowly moving towards his face. Lasting three seconds, he is clearly looking towards Yonoi, with an expression of quiet anger. Sweat covers Celliers’s neck and brow, and his slouch or bush hat allows his blonde hair to fall forwards. His skin is bronzed and soft, while facial stubble roughens his appearance. Compositionally, this framing recalls the opening shot of Yonoi, but here it is Celliers’s disgust which now cakes the shot. Celliers is clearly also being identified as androgynous and strange: a homoerotic mirror to Yonoi. Of course, David Bowie and Ryuichi Sakamoto are star mirrors: a set of extra-textual impressions flood the scene, as they do the entire film.

In the background of this shot, a Japanese soldier is holding his rifle and the straw huts limit the depth of field. Celliers, it is being conveyed, also has nowhere he can go, no escape route: nowhere he can take or hide his own shame. We have learnt earlier in the film that he let his brother be badly bullied, refusing to intervene. Yonoi and Celliers, then, are also *psychologically* alike. The shot’s soundtrack, ‘Sowing the Seed’, a melodic, rhythmic piece that recalls both classical Japanese instruments and orchestral piano, provides a harmonious beat for Celliers to move to and through. At the end of this shot he exits right. Celliers/ Bowie will now lead the scene.

In a remarkable 22-second tracking shot, Celliers walks through the line of soldiers who have been stationed in front of the men, to take up a position right in front of Yonoi. His measured, unrushed approach goes seemingly unnoticed by the watching guards, as if he is part ghost, part visitation. As he strides towards Yonoi, Celliers gestures dust away from his shirt sleeve, does up the button on his shirt pocket, adjusts his slouch hat and wipes sweat away from his face. His walk takes him across the same spaces and lines that Yonoi has previously trodden, but in contrast to his short, hard steps, Celliers seems to float over the ground, barely touching it. Mehdi Derfoufi argues:

When Celliers (Bowie) steps confidently forward toward Yonoi, he’s the only one in motion. All the other characters stay absolutely still as if petrified. Time and space are organised around Bowie as he ‘naturally’ subjugates the direction of the film to his will. Thus, the desire Yonoi (Sakamoto) has for Celliers (Bowie) joins our desire (as Westerners, that is) to see Bowie the star get into action and offer himself to our gaze. The desire for otherness is structured around the star’s body, in a double movement of fascination and repulsion aimed at both Western and Japanese audiences.[[17]](#endnote-17)

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Celliers’s walk across the prison grounds doesn’t entirely happen without the rest of characters also moving: two of the prisoners in the back of the frame, one of the guards and the officers present in the shot either see his movement and gesture towards it or move their positions slightly. Rather than time being frozen or petrified, it seems to be slowed down but not in slow motion. In this shot, time seems haunted, no longer chronormative but full of echo, delay and trace. Celliers is walking in or over Yonoi’s footsteps, *presenting* him in the shot. Celliers’s gestures also domesticate time: when he should be rushing to save the life of a comrade, he adjusts his clothes as if he is attending an officers’ dinner. His attention to detail, to the way he appears, again mirrors Yonoi’s sense of the perfected self. Of course, getting rid of dust, of sweat, is a beautification ritual, made for and because of Yonoi’s interest in him.

However, these are not overtly eroticized gestures, and neither does Celliers’s movement clearly suggest heroic action or intervention. As Celliers strides across the yard and towards Yonoi, the real power of his movement is in its illegibility and liminality. It gestures towards the unnameable, to the queer and to Bowie’s star image which acts as a set of affective impressions and ‘makes plain the centrality of perversity both to Bowie’s performance and to the landscape of the film’.[[18]](#endnote-18) The shot, then, not only calls upon the ectoplasm of what has happened previously in the scene but on the non-binary, sexually fluid star image of David Bowie, which functions as an

open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.[[19]](#endnote-19)

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The shot concludes in long shot, with Yonoi lowering his katana and pushing Celliers away, backwards, muttering for him to ‘go back’. Celliers has his hands behind his back, a gesture of passivity, but also one that recognizes this is a queer space he has entered into and, in fact, has helped shape. A streak of sweat runs its way down Celliers’s shirt. We cannot see his face or rather it is only through Yonoi’s reaction, a look of abject horror mixed with unspeakable desire, that Celliers’s ghostly visage is presented. Two of the soldiers reach for their swords but falter, while Hicksley and his Japanese guards look passively on: they are all bewitched by the violent tango that is now taking place before them.

What next follows is two rapidly edited shots: the first, a medium shot, lasting two seconds, involves Yonoi putting his white-handed glove on Celliers chest, and then his face, pushing him backwards as he does so. The second shot, in close-up, lasting one second, continues this movement, but from behind Celliers, so what we see is his desiring rage lighting up Yonoi’s face. In the first shot, Celliers stares back and into Yonoi’s eyes, with an expression that is neutral or unfathomable, taking on the gaze of the ‘oriental’.[[20]](#endnote-20) In the second shot, Yonoi scrunches up his face, while his white-gloved hand begins to propel Celliers backwards. Yonoi begs Celliers to ‘go back’, the ambiguity in the expression opening up queer lines of (in)sight. The gloved hand carries forward the marker of purity but here it mixes with, or rather touches, ‘danger’, the desiring Other that Celliers represents. More complexly, in a perverse switching of symbolism, as noted above, Yonoi wears the white gloves and the imagined mastery with it. But these white gloves belong to the ‘David Bowie’ found in *Let’s Dance*. The film gestures to beyond its own fiction and to the power that Bowie’s star image transmits.

The next shot is nine seconds long and is a match on action: Celliers falls into the space that Yonoi pushes him to. Shot in a low-angle, medium shot, from behind and to the side of Yonoi, Celliers struggles back to his feet, taking up his position in front of Yonoi. Celliers begins to kiss him on his cheek. His slouch hat has come off in the struggle and his blonde hair is matted but uncovered. They are together shot against the vast expanse of the blue sky: usually a ‘perfect’ setting for a charged kiss like this. Of course, without the hat on, with less of the clothing of the role present, more of the star iconography of David Bowie emerges. So much, in fact, that this act registers, for Bowie fans at least, as *David Bowie kissing Yonoi*. As Derfoufi suggests:

We share Yonoi’s desire of being touched by Celliers (Bowie). When Celliers (Bowie) crosses the invisible barrier that both separates and protects Yonoi’s Oriental body from the body of the star, not only does Yonoi’s desire of having a physical experience with the Western Other get realised, but so does our own desire of being kissed by Bowie, if only by proxy.[[21]](#endnote-21)

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The kiss, though, is not soft and Yonoi is not fully compliant. Celliers pulls Yonoi’s rigid body towards him, his hands forcefully clutching his shoulders, and he looks past him, not directly into his eyes. Celliers’s kiss is sadistic and knowing, and it ‘exposes exactly how sexual Yonoi’s sadism has always been’.[[22]](#endnote-22)

The scene then cuts to a remarkable two-second, close-up shot: the camera positioned behind Celliers. The shot occurs in slow motion, which leaves a ‘trace’ of movement on the image. Yonoi’s face fills the frame, his eyes full of tears, his mouth open – he is unable to form words. Yonoi is both thrilled and horrified by the kiss: it is the exact thing he has always wanted and the touch that reveals that which he has wanted to keep hidden, repressed. In this shot all we can see of Celliers is the back of his shoulders and blonde head. In fact, there is no shot in this entire scene where we see their faces together: we have to imagine what the other’s face is doing, gesturing. And yet, given the mirroring the scene is built on, we can *call up* these impressions: their faces register equally as corporeal traces even when not together present in the shot. This is even more the case in this shot because Yonoi stares directly back at the camera, at the viewer, so that the terror of his lust is directed at us. His tortured gaze wounds as much as it eroticizes and given it is Celliers’s kiss producing or eliciting such a response, it again carries forth the qualities and intensities of David Bowie’s own perverse star image, which suggests that he is

human and flawed (visibly so with a damaged eye) as well as extraordinary in appearance, demeanour and projected self-belief. The ethereal aspect central to Bowie’s star persona and epitomized in many of his characterizations – Major Tom, Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane and so on – overtly embraces the ‘otherness’ of the outsider.[[23]](#endnote-23)

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The following shot is nine seconds in duration: it is a match or continuous cut, beginning with Celliers completing the kiss, in close-up, and moving to a medium close-up, where he withdraws from Yonoi and stares back at him. Yonoi is positioned off-screen, so we are left only with Celliers’s gestures to comprehend. At the beginning of the shot, Celliers’s teeth are exposed and there is a degree of disgust on his face. Again, this relay of ‘mouths’ which do not speak but which registers as distaste washes the shot with, so to speak, the scene’s dirty linen. As Celliers pulls back from Yonoi, he first looks into dead space and then directly into Yonoi’s eyes. The stare is intense and is meant to penetrate Yonoi’s shell. Celliers is surrounded by the thick, jungle canopy, in the same way Yonoi was in the opening shot to the scene. The raw animalism now attaches itself to both characters. There is a shared perversity that moves between and through them. Of course, Celliers’s pupils are differently coloured and bring an ulterior form of difference to the scene. These are David Bowie’s ‘mismatched pupils . . . which have become a positive identifier of his individuality and his alternate, creative, way of seeing’.[[24]](#endnote-24)

In the next shot, eight seconds long, Celliers and Yonoi are framed together. Yonoi faces Celliers, whose back is wet with sweat. Yonoi’s mouth is again captured trying to shape words: it is open but silent, as if speaking of this shame would confirm his own ‘dark desires’. He is lost for words, unable to call upon language to name the unspeakable, the unnameable. Yonoi slowly raises his katana, his mouth continuing to register the terror, his teeth entering its orifice. A glob of saliva forms in his mouth and the moment the katana has been fully raised, ready to strike, he collapses, falling back into the arms of two of his soldiers. Although we cannot see Celliers’s face, it is clear that he doesn’t flinch but stands there as a figure beyond representation: the very kernel or source of the perversity that shakes Yonoi. As Yonoi falls silently back, it is one of his soldiers who screams and attacks Celliers – his sounding and movement like an animal attacking.

Michel Chion terms the moment when the scream replaces language as one in which speech, verbalization, does not suffice: where ‘words’ cannot comprehend the event that has been witnessed.[[25]](#endnote-25) For Chion, the screaming point is the exit of being and an entry point into experiential chaos, where language has failed in the face (mouth) of the unassimilable and unnameable. This chora, ‘anterior to naming’,[[26]](#endnote-26) has a profound effect on the viewer since all they have at that moment in time is a screaming mouth with which to comprehend the events that they have observed. Celliers is the figure, of course, who brings into existence this screaming point. However, the fact that Yonoi fails to scream suggests both a subjugation to his desire and a defeat to his perversity. Celliers has *returned* his repression: Yonoi has been outed.[[27]](#endnote-27) Yet it is not Celliers but Bowie who truly carries forth this dread and desire since his star image is made from these forces and intensities.

At this point in the scene, *Bowie is now completely Celliers*, the liminal star who cannot be fixed, adequately described, whose image exists at the axis of perversion, of queerness, of disgust and desire. As Jacqueline Furby writes:

he can be read as the active instigator in attracting sadistic violence toward himself, or at least toward aspects of his persona, and positioning himself in a liminal, marginal space between life and death: a space that should be familiar to fans of his music.[[28]](#endnote-28)

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The final shot of the scene is twenty-two seconds long. Celliers is carried by the soldiers to a point in front of Hicksley and is savagely attacked by a group of five guards. Hicksley tries to intervene, as does Lawrence, but both are beaten back, their intervention merely a symbolic ‘gesture’ to arrest the violence. The camera is positioned at a long shot as punches and kicks rain down on Celliers. Yonoi and two soldiers are momentarily caught staring at the attack. We hear the sound of these punches and kicks and also the grunts from the exertion it takes. All the while, ‘Sowing the Seed’ provides a sonic envelope of melancholy and pathos.

Near the end of the shot, Celliers is picked up and dragged backwards to where the prisoners are lined up. His face looks to the floor, he may well be unconscious, but his hands are stretched out in a near Christ-like pose – a position he had also taken up earlier in the film. As they dump Celliers’s body on the ground, the scene slowly fades to black, and the musical score also fades out. The violence meted out in this shot is meant, in one coded sense, to act as a punishment for Celliers’s perversity and to bring back the heterosexual, masculinist moral order. Of course, Yonoi used violence as a code for his repressed desires, and so these soldiers are also caught in this desiring loop. Their defence of Yonoi, their collective repulsion at the sight of Celliers kissing him, confirms their own latent, desiring perversity. As the scene ends, Celliers is covered in dust: it cloaks him. He can no longer brush it away and neither can he fix his clothes or hair. He has given up his (star) self to out Yonoi, as he outs himself in the process.

**Conclusion**

According to Peter Brooks, mute gesture is

An expressionistic means – precisely the means of the melodrama – to render meanings which are ineffable, but none the less operative in the sphere of human ethical relationships. Gesture could perhaps then be typed as the nature of catachresis, the ﬁgure used when there is no ‘proper’ name for something. . . . Yet of course it is the fullness, the pregnancy of the blank that is signiﬁcant: meaningful though unspeakable.[[29]](#endnote-29)

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In the *gesturing dust* scene, we can see how mute gesture shapes, drives and energizes the disgust and desire that Yonoi feels. Celliers, his love/hate object, performs a similar function, acting as a perverse mirror: full of shame himself, he loathes the way he is desired. Yet that desire propels him to act, to perform. Of course, Celliers is played by David Bowie, whose star image is composed out of these perverse, floating intensities. The scene teases his arrival, and yet even when he is not present his presence is materialized through Yonoi. The scene powerfully uses gesture because of the affective desires it seeks to reveal.

In the *gesturing dust* scene, we witness how the full materiality and immateriality of a film ‘senses’ into existence suppressed desires, the flavours of shame, the violence of longing. David Bowie’s Celliers haunts the scene from first to last: he is ghost, white glove, mirror, projection, apparition, love interest and figure of perversity. The architecture of the scene is built on his slow reveal, like a shirt or dress is being peeled away, increasing one’s expectations. Yet his (physical) arrival is itself an act of sadism and a death wish. He outs Yonoi, symbolically returns the violence he has metered out on the other prisoners and condemns himself to death. These are the gesturing senses of David Bowie.

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