

Spellbound

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Figure 1 Douglas Gordon 24-Hour Psycho 1993

One of the funniest juxtapositions in the *Spellbound* catalogue shows one of Ridley's Scott's famous aliens and one of Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* grimacing at one another across the page. We are earnestly informed that the look of the *Alien* was partly inspired by Bacon's paintings, and here, it is true, both bare their teeth. In one sense, it is a truism to say that art and film inhabit the same cultural climate, that artists go to the movies and that some movie-makers (like Scott) went to art school, or like to look at paintings; nevertheless, an exhibition which includes the work of Terry Gilliam and Fiona Banner, Peter Greenaway and Steve McQueen might lead the viewer to ask just how specific such links are and how much analysis they can bear.

The premise of the exhibition is that while, particularly in Britain, the connection between fine art and the cinema has been sporadic and in academic circles long neglected, now, at the hundred-year mark, more promising developments may herald a more thorough collaboration or even an integration. Despite the long history of collaboration documented in Ian Christie's catalogue essay and in the accompanying chronology, the organisers claim that there is still something radical about bringing the two together: Philip Dodd even thinks of their coming together in this show as 'promiscuous' and a 'miscegnation'.¹ Much recent art has used film as an element, often in ambitious and complex installations, but this greater integration is only part of a much wider interbreeding in which elements of the mass media as a whole, from television to tabloids, have been brought into high art. Looking at various recent exhibitions which have dealt with the subject, *Wild Walls* at the Stedelijk and *Pandemonium* at the ICA, both make little of the distinction between film and video, and both place artists' engagement with film within a broader context of the assimilation of mass culture.²

¹ Philip Dodd, 'Modern Stories', in Hayward Gallery, *Spellbound: Art and Film*, edited by Philip Dodd and Ian Christie, London 1996, p. 32.

² Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum, *Wild Walls*, 1995; *Pandemonium* is at the ICA, London until 21 April.

Most of the work in *Spellbound* was commissioned for the exhibition, and the curators have clearly wanted to make a spectacular and accessible statement, trumpeting the strength of contemporary British talent. *Spellbound* takes its title from the Hitchcock-Dalí collaboration in 1945, and there are a number of dream-worlds constructed here, from Paolozzi's storehouse of cinema detritus, punctuated with his familiar mannequins to Greenaway's spectacular environment which mixes objects, light, sound, smell and even people, so that the viewer might feel for a time as if they had wandered into one of his films. Hitchcock is there in Douglas Gordon's *24-Hour Psycho*, silently projected in a darkened room at two frames per second; at this speed the film jumps rather than runs, flickering from still to still. The effect is unreal and hypnotic, with the most minor details, dwelling on the screen for long seconds or minutes, assuming an unlooked for significance.

If the show seems arbitrary, eclectic and spectacular, this is because of the peculiar optic through which it views the scene. The great variety of work in the exhibition does little to illuminate the individual contributions, strong though many of these are. Gilliam's entertaining, interactive advertisement for his forthcoming film *Twelve Monkeys*, or Scott's preparatory and promotional material displayed on video monitors, sit very strangely with Boyd Webb's funny romance tracking the life and love of a sprouting piece of popcorn on a cinema hall, or Fiona Banner's scary Vietnam-film writing piece and script book, let alone with Steve McQueen's silent black-and-white film exploring the mutual misperceptions of its subjects, white woman and black man, who can never meet. The principle of 'promiscuous' inclusion is most evident with Rego's paintings of sturdy and sexualised Disney characters, which show only that artists sometimes take subjects from the cinema.

There is one (albeit ironic) attempt to make a cinematic *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Greenaway's installation sets out to impress: one of the Hayward's large spaces has been darkened, hung with screens along which words or patterns flicker. As in an exploded diagram, the cinema has been stripped down to its basic elements, seats, the events on which it feeds (represented by newspapers), props, actors and buzzwords. All are illuminated by moving coloured lights and animated by sound. There are sudden plunges into darkness, gunshots, the rumble of trains, and an insistent musical soundtrack. The actors are displayed, like exhibits, in vitrines according to some weird thespian taxonomy; one day when I was there they had all acted in a Derek Jarman film, and it was a shock to see Toyah Wilcox exhibited there—of course some

visitors collect autographs. The relation of the viewer to these exhibits is uncomfortable, because they look back, so most people spend their time examining the numerous and clichéd little scenarios laid out on the prop tables. There seems to be only one leitmotif which runs through them, the frequent presence of pairs of glasses, often hung floating above the props, or tucked almost out of sight in some container. At first, it seems as though this might be some dubious pun about spectacle but, on discovering the ensemble labelled 'optician', you might be excused for thinking you have hit the motherlode. And on the optician's chart displayed there, only one word can be read: hoax.

Spellbound succeeds in being accessible, affecting and entertaining—and these are considerable virtues. Yet here they have been bought at the expense of critical content. Because the show is mere celebration, the selected works often seem to fit together strangely, and raise questions left entirely unanswered. This meretricious aspect is reflected best in its most successful promotional coup, a short film by Damien Hirst, which has been much featured in the Sunday supplements. Hirst's film was to have been called *Is Mr Death In?*, an anagram of the artist's name—and with its contemporary art-world references, it is a self-obsessed film; one character dresses in a Hirst-style dot painting dress, there are fags, drugs and swish parties. The final image is of a butterfly burning on a fly zapper. For those who keep up with the Hirst mythology, these are all familiar elements, and they are used for the deliberate construction of an internally reinforcing structure of cross-reference. As with Duchamp, the slightest bit of text or scrap of image feeds off the programmatic whole. But *Hanging Around*, as it is now called, bears the puerile imprint of its earlier title. There are graphic scenes which may be designed to court controversy; of throwing up, shooting up and of a decorative, naked corpse in a bloody bath. Strip away the bolt-on Hirstian iconography, and it is a conventional tale of a man with 'special powers', who can be at more than one place at a time, and whom death inexorably follows. This compact little man, played by Keith Allen, is bored with the mundane world of family and yearns metaphorically to fly straight upwards. At one point in his battle with a cerebral analyst, and here as at others he seems to speak for Hirst, he proclaims, 'Anybody can do *anything*—the hardest thing is deciding what it is you want to do ... *intellect* has nothing to do with it'. Well (and the organisers of the show may do well to remember this) no they can't, and yes it does.

Spellbound is at the Hayward Gallery until 6 May 1996.