

The sculptor as film-maker

Artists' Films
Tate Gallery

Paul Overy

The Tate Gallery is showing a short season during the next three weeks of films made by David Hall, who formerly worked as a sculptor, and by Hall in collaboration with the film-maker Tony Sinden. Although the Tate has shown occasional evenings of artists' films (as opposed to films about art) this is the first time that they have shown these during the day, at times when casual visitors to the gallery can drop in to see them.

As long ago as 1916, Marinetti and the Futurists called in the manifesto *The Futurist Cinema* for an autonomous use of the film medium, instead of as an interpretative medium with a literary basis in the drama or the novel. During the Twenties in Europe some of the most important contributions to the experimental cinema were made by artists: Léger, Duchamp, Man Ray, Picabia, Eggeling, Richter. The coming of the talkies with its powerful technical pressures towards realism and filmed drama virtually killed the experimental film for a generation. Gradually, after the Second World War, experiment began again, particularly in America. Once more many of those involved were artists. (Warhol is the best known.) In England a number of experimental films have been made at the London Film Co-op, due largely to the initiative of Malcolm Legrice, a Slade-trained painter.

The sculptures that David Hall made before he turned to film explored distortions of perspective. The most recent of these were works which lay flat on the floor and in which the surface of the floor itself was an integral part of the work. The last of these, made after Hall had already begun to experiment with film, was a shape made with a sanding machine on the painted floor of the ICA gallery for the *Sculpture out of the Sixties* exhibition in 1970.

Hall's first film, *Vertical*, made with a grant from the Arts Council, is a lyrical work in which the qualities of the English landscape are brought out by various punctuating or distorting devices, similar to those used in his sculpture, which at the same time draw attention both to the artificiality of the landscape and of the film medium itself. Hall uses the vertical impingement of a figure, a post or a tree to reveal the nature of a landscape which is naturally horizontal, to show how these vertical punctuations define its space and distance. (There is no space without things in it.)

Timecheck, Hall's second film,



Still from *Vertical*

made for the BFI Production Board, is more complex. Like *Vertical* it is concerned with the outside world and our perception of it, but, as the name of the film suggests, with a much greater stress on the dimension of time. Where in *Vertical* Hall used various physical devices to examine the nature of space and distance, in *Timecheck* he uses film devices like time-lapse photography (a single frame exposed every two to five seconds instead of 24 times a second) or fast motion to compress time. The relationship between time and distance is explored at length and in many different ways (sometimes almost too complicatedly). The landscape is seen from ground level, from the top of mountains, from a light aeroplane flying through the clouds, so that the coloured counties are glimpsed through the cumuli, from a high-flying airliner where only the cloud ceiling below is visible, and from a satellite (in material duped from a NASA film) where the earth is seen as a turning sphere shrouded in tatters of cloud.

Some of the images in *Timecheck* are of great romantic beauty and sombreness. Speeded up clouds boiling over a stormy landscape, a shadow moving inexorably across a piece of

cracked concrete, a red sun plunging into the horizon like a falling star. But these images are balanced by structural devices which keep reminding one that this is film and of the processes that making a film involve, that "the truth at 24 frames per second" is something that can be inexhaustibly manipulated. The film finishes with a sound loop from the NASA film of an astronaut's voice repeating "I think we're going into darkness now." and after a short while the film ends going, literally, into darkness.

Both *Vertical* and *Timecheck* are uneven, stuffed with more ideas than can be dealt with in relatively short films. Sometimes they are repetitive and confusing, but they are rich in texture and offer something new at each viewing. In the most recent films, made in collaboration, Hall and Sinden concentrate on single ideas in depth.

7 TV Pieces are the seven three-minute films that Hall wishes to preserve from 10 commissioned by the Scottish Arts Council for the 1971 Edinburgh Festival. Scottish Television were persuaded to insert one of these each day between normal programmes without comment or announcement. Seen on the cinema screen, one

has to imagine their effect in this quite different context. Sometimes Hall uses surrealist images, reminiscent of Magritte, like an old television set burning in the middle of a landscape. In one of the simplest and best, a tap is lowered and the whole screen fills up gradually with water like a glass goldfish bowl, then is drained out. Another condenses a whole evening's TV seen in a college TV room while the sound-track is three minutes of "real time" on the sound track.

Sinden assisted Hall on the TV pieces, and in *Five Films*, made, like *Vertical*, with an Arts Council grant, they worked together. There is an increasing concern with the nature and process of film as a medium. But unlike much experimental, so-called "structuralist" cinema, this is not explored tediously and academically. The nature of the film process, light projected on a flat surface, is contrasted with the powerful illusion of realism which it creates. This is most clearly demonstrated in *This Surface*. The first sequence is shot in a Brixton pub at Christmas time. A middle-aged man dances in the bar balancing a pint of beer on his head surrounded by a laughing, clapping audience. The human warmth and vitality is so dominant that one is completely "drawn into" the scene, oblivious of the film process. The second sequence is a series of travelling shots along a deserted sea-front filmed with a slide of clear glass before the lens on which is scrawled in red a written definition of the physical nature of the film as projected light on a flat surface. The words go in and out of focus, so that now one sees them, now the filmed background.

In *View colour* is imperceptibly introduced into a black-and-white take of a room with a window giving on to a street. *Between*, the most formal of the films, is a repeated sequence of a cameraman filming the screen and the projector in a viewing theatre, made by duping each print from the last so that the quality gradually deteriorates and the recognizable image is slowly reduced to an abstract pattern of flickering light.

It is a pity that the Tate authorities haven't put on view the sculptures by Hall in its collection to complement the films. But one hopes that they will continue this experiment of short daytime seasons (and one-off evening shows) of films by artists.

Vertical and 7 TV Pieces are showing this week until Friday, *Timecheck* from Monday, May 20, to Friday, May 24, and *Five Films* from Tuesday, May 28, to Friday, May 31. All dates are inclusive and the programmes begin at noon and 4 pm each day and last roughly an hour.

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