FILMS AT THE TATE

DAVID HALL : WORKS IN FILM   1968-71
and jointly with TONY SINDEN   1972-73

Wednesday 8th May 6.30 p.m.

Vertical (1968 17 mins)   Timecheck (1969-71 43 mins)   7 TV Pieces
(1971 23 mins)

Thursday 9th May 6.30 p.m.

Five films, 1972-3 : View (10 mins)   Actor (11 mins)   This Surface
(11 mins)   Edge (10 mins)   Between (17 mins)

The films will form a short season through May with public screenings
twice daily:

Week beginning	13 May	Vertical & 7 TV Pieces
Week beginning	20 May	Time Check
Week beginning	Tues. 28 May	Five Films

In the early to mid sixties, David Hall was making large welded steel
sculptures which were mainly formalistic, investigating gestalt
possibilities, relations of parts to wholes and presenting perspectival
eccentricities. By 1966 his work had so changed its appearance, becoming
flat and based on the ground plane, that his focus of interest was decisively
revealed as being concerned with visual perception mechanisms to the
exclusion of almost all other considerations. The Tate's "Nine" is a good
example, consisting of nine planes of board raised slightly above ground
and grouped to form a complicated configuration of differing and contra-
dictory perspectives. We can now see that the progress of his work from
heavy constructions to physically far less substantial sculptures and finally
into the completely insubstantial medium of film was entirely logical.
The physicality of "Nine" was a concession to natural laws: it would
have been better if the planes could have been projected, not fabricated,
and so exist only visually. As it is, the wooden planes of "Nine" bend and
float anyway, as if they had no substance; Hall's grasp of perspectival
illusion was used to overcome and all but negate their physicality. His
final sculpture but non-filmic work was done in 1970 at the ICA where he
used a sanding machine to mark out a shape in an existing painted floor.
Thus he used a conventional sculptural process, carving, but the resultant
work was literally without substance - it was in a sense the print or
vestige of an activity - and it was a work which, unlike his much earlier

welded steel pieces, was not meant to last. The ICA floor was soon used for
something else. It was this move away from the preciousness of the object
which also led Hall logically into film. Through the late sixties, many
object-makers were trying to get art to the masses by making multiples
while Hall went straight to the most potent form of multiple which already
existed. Potent because it offered rich possibilities of participation -
provided that the film maker could get his audience up from their supine
positions into which the commercial cinema had flattened them. But the central
logic of Hall's move into film turns on his preoccupation with ever increasingly
complicated problems and phenomena of perception: a droplet on a pilot's
window is indistinguishable, Hall has noted, from an approaching aircraft
and the pilot finds himself turning to fire at it or taking avoiding action.

Vertical was Hall's first film, made in 1968 with an Arts Council grant.
It is a busy film, with hindsight perhaps too busy, which sets up many
different illusions, mainly in a landscape setting, only to reveal amusingly
the secret of its own devices. The important point is that the perspectives
in the film are all "corrected" ones. They are monocular, or, if you like,
literally Through-The-Lens-Perspectives which vanish when the viewpoint
is moved even fractionally. The locations are almost always pleasant and
lyrical with sound to match. I suspect that Hall, a country boy, was simply
enjoying himself but there is too the desire to entertain his audience or,
at any rate, not to risk alienating them before they are with him. In some
of the later films made with Tony Sinden, this same ability to entertain is
developed into a conscious attempt to seduce and psychologically implicate
the audience in a deliberate effort to use their conditioned viewing habits
as a Structuralist factor.

Timecheck is wholly more ambitious and is on an altogether larger scale
yet it follows on naturally from Vertical and some sequences could belong with
ease in either. Many of the locations are glamorous - Gibraltar, the Alps,
banks of clouds - but their appeal is checked by a number of opposites such
as scenes of ecological squalor - like motorways where the absurdity of the traffic
is emphasised by speed up techniques, or of relentless plane take-offs so
oppressive that the sequence looks as though it was made by an anti-Heathrow
lobby. But Hall uses other devices to offset the glamour, which are deeper
and more penetrating in their effect on the direct perception of the viewer,
forcing him to participate at a different level: black or blank screens, harsh
sounds used as punctuation to organise the film. These are Structuralist
to some extent and other articulatory passages are obviously so, such as
an over exposed piece of landscape which is in fact test film incorporated
now as part of the total experience, or the view of his shoes which is Hall
testing the camera. But the main advance in Timecheck for Hall is that,
as the title implies, he is now confronting the all-important issue in film
of time as pace and time as duration, something he had not discovered when
he made   Vertical which in essence goes little further than still photography -
it simply used movement to set up or reveal illusion. Stop-frame photography is
used plentifully throughout Timecheck as a means of investigating and
commenting on time-processes. There is a thinly discernible narrative from
beginning to end, from the Earth's surface, through staged altitudes, through

the stratosphere and into space - these are the positions from which we see the
earth, with our views naturally modified by time as a factor. Needless
to say the progression is continually interrupted with repetitions, with separate
but related issues, all of which are filmed with a sense of ambiguity and
instability. The repetitions are important because they deny the usual
pedestrian logic and continuity of the editor - they frequently amount to a
filmic equivalent to the strange and amusing perceptual "editing" of Magritte,
an artist much admired by Hall whose own humour is used to similar effect.
In this context there is a remarkable sequence where Hall presents us with a
small landscape in the middle of the screen which is entirely surrounded by
sky. The landscape then expands, diminishing the sky, until the original centre
section fills the whole screen. The effect is intriguing and looks like
laboratory trickery. In fact it is all done with mirrors. All done in the
shooting. Hall designed a large mirror with a hole in the centre; the
mirror had to be angled to reflect the sky and the centre aperture had therefore
to be irregularly shaped - a particular trapezium - to look rectangular in
perspective. It is the best "corrected perspective" I have yet seen.

Timecheck is probably still too busy despite its all-out attack on time.
Throughout art history, artists not yet in command of a new medium have
tended to put too much into it, often out of moral earnestness, out of a desire
not to spare effort. Up to this point in his films I feel that he was trying hard
to replace that physical substance of his early sculptures with an abundance of
conceptual substance, a laudable aim which I think has more truly succeeded
in the later works. His dominance of the time factor is the key in all this and
he is conscious of having set himself a very real and necessary problem - and
in my view, a tough one. With old-style sculpture, the viewer spends as much
time as he wants in looking. Anybody working in an art gallery can see
the main drawback of that situation which is that people are frequently inadequately
equipped to pace themselves in relation to any particular work. They just
walk by. With film, the artist can take over responsibility for the problem
and, if he is up to the task, can direct the pace of the experience.

7 TV Pieces

This is a reel made up from seven quite separate pieces selected from ten
which were originally shown on Scottish Television during the 1971 Edinburgh
Festival. Now, Hall is an active and committed member of the Artists
Placement Group and although this TV project was "placed" quite independently
by himself it is symptomatic of his desire to be involved as an artist in a non-
art context. Much of his film-work has brought him into working contact with
non-artists, such as pilots or a psychologist researching flying problems and
the exchange clearly means a great deal to Hall just as they apparently enjoy
working with him and extending themselves somewhat to co-operate and
accommodate his ideas. It may well be the case that this aspect - which is
a process aspect - will turn out to have been one of the dominant themes in
Hall's oeuvre, rather as it is with Christo, for whom the act of working with
and maybe even directing, say, a bunch of tough engineers is crucial.

That said, it remains true that Hall's work is threaded through with art references of various types and I would think mostly unconsciously. His fascination with the spectacle of the Banner Cloud, caused by the Levanter wind to hover over the Rock of Gibraltar, is a case in point. The idea of a vapourous mass poised over such a solid one puts you in mind of Gottlieb. The first of these TV pieces presents a Magrittian image again and the second shows a line of small trees spaced out at intervals exactly like the series by Mondrian of trees on the Gein. I take this to be not a conscious reflection but a strong image digested long previously and then reissued as part of a personal statement that is thoroughly and easily recognisable as David Hall's. He has a precious touch which probably works best without self-conscious awareness. For example, the window image in the second TV piece makes a near Golden Section - and with admirable graphic quality., an appeal it shares with the tap image in the following piece. One is reminded of countless times in the first two films, Vertical and Timecheck, where he has formally organised the screen in the manner of an excellent abstract painter, not in any fussily adjusted sense but with full-frontal boldness and with an acceptance of head-on symmetry. Perhaps the most exciting occasion is the Gibraltar sequence in Timecheck where he bisects the screen with a line of lens-flair running exactly vertically from top to bottom, plumb in the centre. Conversely, in the second TV piece, the landscape, the clouds, the moving sun caught not with stop-frame photography but with real takes at hourly intervals - all this entirely seductive imagery could have appeared just as easily in Timecheck but for the fact that the TV pieces are black and white.

The tap piece is humourous - almost cartoonish. It must be remembered that originally the image was exactly to scale. But the effect is not Monty Pythonish; rather the piece draws attention to the TV set as furniture, as an object. Some of the other pieces (nos. 1, 3, 5 & 6) in this group achieve the same aim. The fourth piece, using stop-frame, confuses the various time systems present in a TV viewing lounge: people entering and leaving, programme changing, a contrapuntal sound effect of real-time sound track on TV against the second-by-second click of the stop-frame machine. Silence and peace only arrive with the epilogue which nobody stays to hear. The last TV piece of the seven is different from the rest. It uses duration to pose a question about the nature of the scene depicted. The content of this piece is minimal yet it occasions more of a response on the part of the viewer, arguably, than any of the other six. For me it is the most satisfactory, with the tap piece second for different reasons.

Five Films Made by David Hall and Tony Sinden   1972-3

View (10 mins) Actor (11 mins) This Surface (11 mins) Edge (10 mins) Between (17 mins)

All these films try to implicate the audience in the "other side" of the screen while at the same time making it quite clear that there is no other side. View sets the tone by beginning with a white door   - that is, you look at a film of a white door   which is therefore indistinguishable from the actual screen in the

room lit through clear film. . But the filmed door is moveable and it is gently turned "backward" to reveal the image of an interior, but so slowly that at first the beginnings of that interior read as a positive shape at the edge of the screen. Just as Degas asserted the flatness of the picture plane by extreme sensitivity to the formal and psychological implications of its edges, so it is in these films. In View the emphasis is on formal legibility but later on in Edge the edges are used to create bathos, as well as for formal reasons, out of a scenethat many would want to take seriously as pregnant drama.

Actor, This Surface, Edge are Structuralist films in a non-obvious sense. Other structuralists have been predominantly interested in various factors of the film's own production process: camera and projector mechanisms, emulsion characteristics, lens properties etc., real-time duration. A concern with such aspects is demonstrated in a thorough-going way in Between and more sporadically in Hall's own previous work but in these three films, Hall and Sinden add as a Structuralist element the history and conditioning of the way people have come to regard film. They use as an element in itself the immediate suspension of belief and awareness of reality with which the commercial cinema has trained audiences to greet film. So Hall and Sinden together extend the notion of essence of the medium to include not merely structural factors of visual perception (structural here as opposed to motivational - "Eye and Brain" factors) but also socio-psychological factors - the characteristics of audience behaviour. Such a concern is deeply of its time and is in marked contrast to the earlier, Bohemian phase in art history where once the art-object has been bought and taken away, its operation is no longer the concern of the artist. Edge is a Western treated with highly intelligent humour - long passages of time with very little happening are offered for their own sake but in the guise of a suspense-making convention. A duel is apparently about to take place but somehow never does. Other Western conventions are used such as the graphic silhouette which here, instead of pointing up the heroic, makes connections, in my mind at least, with other filmic images such as the window frame in the second of the TV pieces.

This Surface is the simplest of the five films and makes its single didactic point about the illusory situation clearly and well. The words THIS SURFACE are written on a slide of glass which is slipped into a matte box in front of the camera lens. The words slide in and out of focus, superimposed on interesting, amusing or engrossing situations behind them. The artists allow a further figure-ground complication whereby the words are in focus but illegible through lack of contrast, a confusion which is exacerbated by a moving "background".

Actor is altogether more complicated, second in complexity of contrivance only to Between. The idea stems from a recognition that audiences need to identify with a human being and investigates the time barrier between shooting the film of that person and the subsequent projection of it, and not forgetting the intermediate editing stage. The actor is seen to hold a telephone conversation with the audience itself but in keeping with movie convention, we naturally hear only one side of the conversation.

This film is unusually devoid of humour, for which is substituted a nagging
anxiety stemming from the actor himself who cannot grasp his situation
any more easily than the audience can. He is surprised as he double-crosses
his legs, a perplexing action not present in the shooting, as the actor
protests, but one forced on him by the editor. Actor and audience become
aware that he is nothing more than flickering light, a projection through
time, an impression heightened when his speech is taken out of sinc.

Between is the longest of this group of films and is arguably the best. It
is a highly-wrought piece of Structuralism which makes no concessions to
the audience. Like the other films, it implicates viewers in what is
"happening" on the "other side" of the screen by the straightforward device of
choosing a viewing auditorium as a shooting location. Also, one is fully
conscious of the role of the photographer, ,perhaps as intermediary, by methods
which recall parts of Timecheck. The action is simple: the camera is made
to approach a lit screen before turning full circle to approach a projector. In
shooting, the trip was made only once but the sequence is repeated by an
intricate process using successive generations of prints - a print from a print
from a print, etc. - except that only alternate prints were used in order to
avoid a mirror image. By this technique there is a progressive deterioration
of "quality" and the image breaks up into signs and symbols and finally into
abstract fragments. The colour is freed by the same process and we are left
(using this particular stock) with three primaries. (In a partial sense this is
the reverse of what happens in the first film of the series, View, where colour
is introduced into a black and white film at first in almost imperceptible
flashes and then progressively until it has taken the film over). The sound
track of Between is interesting: it uses the rattle made by double-perforated
film being put through a projector with the optical sound turned to "on". But
since the sound is dubbed here, Hall and Sinden were able to increase the
volume as the action nears the projector to suggest synchronised sound and then
to deny that "realism" by turning it up in the opposite direction. What we
have, then, is a clear case of art as truth through fabrication, with the
imperative that the fabrication, the contrivance, must be revealed.

Terry Measham
May 1974