

David Bowie

Cynthia Rose, *City Limits*, 3 June 1983

In the days of Beau Brummell or even Baudelaire, to be a dandy was to be a true social outlaw – one whose fixed individuality constituted an unwavering sign of separation from society. Society, if it chose, had to come to them – and if it didn't so choose, then that was that.

Obsessed with forging a wholeness of spirit through personal confrontation, the dandies were possessed by a true revolutionary fervour. But this Romantic faith did not last. The dandy mutated into the very epitome of drawing-room deliberation – Noel Coward and Cole Porter, men who sought to sell the world placebos for its deepest needs. Relieved by detachment, their decisions ran the opposite way – to *seek* social acceptance, by demonstrating that the displaced self could celebrate rather than solve its losses. Unwilling to wrestle with doubts, they offered the middle-class conceit of 'style', and an art doomed never to transcend the High Street, the hairdresser and the tailor.

David Bowie is their inheritor, but he has improved on his inheritance. Unlike so many in his original field of rock, he is neither a fool, cretin or (really) a thief. Yet when he has achieved profundity it has almost always occurred either by accident or as a result of his long, usually misunderstood relationships with three major sources: Lou Reed, Iggy Pop and Robert Fripp.

With them – as, increasingly, with his fans – Bowie maintains a vampiric, Kerouac-Cassady involvement. Or to put it most simply, he has felt no compunctions about merchandising aspects of their separate (and much more direct) explorations of the isolated heart and mind. But then, Bowie could not really have made much from the horrors, disgust, despair or hard-won victories of the genuinely unconventional character: by his own admission he himself *is* basically conventional. And at 36, he even has the grace to be more honest about it:

'There certainly is no inherent value or real meaning in "cool",' he laughed during his recent London visit. 'My well-documented Los Angeles period – drugs, nervous collapse, very few genuine friends – that was the beginning of my coming to terms with what hip *didn't* mean. At my age I now realise I've enjoyed a great deal of easy success just by trying on different viewpoints; consequently I'm hoping to now do something which will mean a bit more to my fellow man.'

Bowie claims he owes this to son Joey; 'to do something for the future' and 'to re-order a few of my pre-suppositions.' In literally scores of recent interviews similar statements of intent appear, always with an engaging frankness about the fact – that although they may 'seem naff or naïve', Bowie is dead serious about his new positivism.

The artistic evidence thus far, however, is somewhat less convincing than is the pleasant chap in the tasteful silk suits. *Let's Dance*, an LP which contains only five absolutely new tracks (plus Moroder's theme from *The Cat People*, the already-released title cut and 'China Girl' from Iggy Pop's 1977 *The Idiot*) opened the gates for press overkill. But as a Bowie album, it's dead average: a select play of timely sounds escorts rather random, melodramatic lyrics through an all-too-familiar fixation with the more debased concepts of 'modernity'.

Australian videos notwithstanding, its 'ethnic influences' recall the tribal sounds of the Philly studio more than anything else. And on it Bowie's vocals are those of the professional valentine, the true gigolo condemned forever to mime sincerity. A soul addicted, it would seem, to the *appearance* rather than the experience of real sexuality. This fiction of virtuosity has provided our opener for *The Hunger* – a commercial pulper of a vampire film in which Bowie portrays one 'John Blaylock', the lover/victim/fellow vampire of seductive 4,000-year-old Miriam (Catherine Deneuve). Blaylock appears in only half the movie, after which he is superseded by the spunky Susan Sarandon – who luckily thinks nothing of leaving a building in Manhattan and crossing town to find herself on a Mayfair doorstep. She also gives away all the film's ponderous pretensions when her boyfriend asks why Miriam presents her with an expensive antique only hours after they have met. 'She's just that kind of woman,' replies Sarandon earnestly, 'She's *European*.'

Unintentionally her phrase encapsulates the inescapably bourgeois premises from which proceed so many of Bowie's assumptions about what does shock. And of all the aspects in his chameleon career, it is shock which has never failed to sell: the aura of a jaded, perverse sexuality. The same aura which made Ziggy Stardust a phenomenon still capable of bringing in the bucks (recently, Bowie has re-mixed the D A Pennebaker documentary of his last Ziggy concert for release here later this year).

Young Joey Jones – as the former Zowie Bowie is now known – may think Ziggy is 'as funny as Captain Sensible' but Dad seems perfectly at ease with the idea Junior might eventually run across the heavy-handed depictions of lust, narcissism, and (the somewhat masked theme of the undertaking) addiction in *The Hunger*.

Not that Joey won't have most of it beforehand via commercial advertising; the film looks like it was interior decorated rather than directed, and boasts a list of credits to the likes of Butler and Wilson, Tirelli, and P W Forte. It's based on a 1980 novel by *Wolfen* author Whitley Streiker, but its general atmosphere of effete langour, moneyed *ennui*, and the corruption of a little girl recall much more vividly *Interview With a Vampire*, Ann Rice's runaway American best-seller of three years ago.

There's one really ugly aspect to this rather laughably lugubrious tale and that is its central metaphor: the 'hunger' which drives both David and Deneuve is more than the bloodlust of traditional vampirism, or even the now-familiar erotic symbolism of same. Aiming instead for a really contemporary idea of decadence, director Tony Scott has drawn clear and unmistakable parallels with hard drug addiction (including track marks on Sarandon's arm and a nasty scene of her kicking and screaming from would-be withdrawal).

Bowie remains evasive on the subject: 'I'm aware that it's very bloody and erotic. But I wanted to work with Tony – he's Ridley Scott's brother, you know? I am a bit worried that it's a little too perverse; partly because I have been over-identified with that, God knows. But working with Susan Sarandon was terrific, it made up for almost all the debits.'

About the fact that the other real resonance in *The Hunger* comes from the scene where Blaylock helplessly ages 300 years in the space of a day, the star is more frank: 'Oh yes – a lot of people have already said that both my gay following and the critics who label me

a narcissist are going to have a field day with that one. But then in real life I'm approaching 40 quite happily and I feel perfectly fit, so I don't really have any comment of my own to make.'

Bowie will, however, comment the topic of style. 'Style is only a superficial juxtaposition of things, as they are arranged against other to offset their individual qualities and meanings. But it can have important results; if used *artistically*, it can have great effect.' Certainly amidst the movie's OD on 'stylishness', (calla lilies, antique crystal, Egyptian artefacts and a better body brought in for the bottom half of 40-year-old Deneuve's nude scenes), this great effect is posited on the assumption that addiction is a *glamorous* form of decadence. Thus however corny the calculated illusions about 'sophistication' presented by the film, it still stands to obscure the real truths about addiction –as well as romanticising a process about as glamorous as a life sentence on a sewage farm. That's in addition to re-instating the passive nature of a screen persona who seems to be Mummy's boy as well as the 'romantic' lead (Deneuve carts Bowie's collapsed body upstairs in a lift just like Candy Clark did in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*). What remains indisputably interesting about *The Hunger* is the fact that, whatever other projects he may undertake (and whatever the critical reception afforded *Merry Christmas Mister Lawrence*), its themes and character will allow Bowie to retain a major influence in that booming market for fatalism and polymorphous sexuality which Ziggy helped to establish.

'Well,' he says carefully, 'if what you're really saying is that in a disintegrating culture an artist can get away with the lack of an integrated self, I suppose I'd have to agree; I do know I have been guilty of exploiting that in the past. Regrettably, in fact, I've often been counted more remarkable for what I'm not – not predictable, not drab, not Philistine, whatever – than for what I like to think I am. But I'm learning how to live with that.'

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