



BOWIE: STARMAN AND THE SILVER SCREEN

The Man Who Fell to Earth

Bowie's first starring role came in Nicolas Roeg's visionary sci-fi film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, the story of an alien's surreal experiences after its spaceship crash lands on Earth. Bowie advances on the otherworldly image of his Ziggy Stardust persona, playing Thomas Jerome Newton as a fragile, increasingly emaciated dandy, evolving the Thin White Duke image of his contemporaneous *Station to Station* LP. By his own admission, Bowie was heavily using cocaine in this period and the combination of his elegantly wasted performance and Roeg's fractured, often startling visuals make for one of the strangest sci-fi films of the era – a clear influence on the recent *Under the Skin* (2013). An image of Bowie from the film was used on the cover of the artist's 1977 masterpiece *Low*.

Samuel Wigley, bfi.org.uk

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

In the novel *The Man Who Fell to Earth* by Walter Tevis, this visitor from outer space had a clearly defined purpose: to bring the survivors from his own drought-stricken planet to Earth's Eden, and once there, to save us earthlings from making the same destructive errors as his people did. In Paul Mayersberg's script, this purpose is deliberately withdrawn, not so much in its overall implications (although the messianic element is very much toned down) as in its detail. Invited to work on Newton's research project, for instance, Doctor Bryce (Rip Torn) is instructed to concern himself with problems of fuel conservation, but finds himself worried about the recovery programme. 'Don't be', says Newton flatly, and no elucidation is forthcoming. A line or two of dialogue from the novel would have sufficed to explain that the Antheans have space ships but no fuel, and that Newton's mission is simply to rectify this lack. Judging this, like so many other matters of plot detail, to be irrelevant to the theme they have elaborated from the book, Mayersberg and Roeg prefer not to explain.

The result, not unpredictably, has been a fairly general charge of mystification. Whether couched in terms of chic dismissal (John Coleman, Russell Davies), guarded appreciation (David Robinson) or somewhat baffled enthusiasm (Dilys Powell), the common denominator of critical opinion seems to have been that 'The problem with *The Man Who Fell to Earth* is that it contains enough ideas for six different films; and far too many, in my opinion, for one' (Nigel Andrews, *Financial Times*). The problem is perhaps added to by the fact that the equally mystificatory metamorphoses of *Performance*, *Walkabout* and *Don't Look Now* occurred in areas of clear definition (further defined by the way essentially ordinary people grew increasingly aware of specifically alien cultures: the Übermensch, the aborigine, the clairvoyant). Newton, on the other hand, is an alien coping with a familiar culture (ours), and as he is gradually forced to integrate, to become like us, a sense of disorientation necessarily accompanies the fact that we, simultaneously have become *him*.

There are more ways than one of stroking a cat, however. And the way to tame *The Man Who Fell to Earth* is not by trying to perceive an intellectual logic which isn't there, but by following the tangential, emotional continuity that orders its ideas into a tightly woven structure which becomes an astonishingly literal illustration of Marvell's conceit: 'As lines, so loves oblique, may well/Themselves in every angel greet/But ours so truly parallel/Though infinite, can never meet.'

One point on which the critics are unanimous is in finding David Bowie entirely convincing as a visitor from another planet. Since no one could reasonably be expected to recognise an extra-terrestrial, what this means is that Bowie's presence and performance suggest qualities that are recognised as common denominators of difference, of alienness, of – in fact – non-humanness. There is, naturally, his bright orange hair. More particularly, however, a composite picture emerges of vulnerability: 'ethereal, pale, enigmatic features', 'slight, fearful facial tremors', 'frail body', 'gaunt, sad and dignified', 'a person ill equipped to cope with the rigours of life on our particular planet.' What is significant about this reaction is that vulnerability and those attributes commonly associated with it (shyness, gentleness, hesitancy, tenderness) are readily accepted as being non-human qualities. The attitude, of course, is cunningly implanted by the film itself in its juxtaposition of Newton's defencelessness with the tough protective shells adopted ('to cope with the rigours of life...') by the three humans who, through their intimate association with him, gradually rediscover something of that vulnerability: Farnsworth (Buck Henry) and his pebble-eyed greed, Bryce's cynical indifference, Mary Lou (Candy Clark) and her drunken, bovine resignation.

Echoing – or rather, supporting – this seesaw relationship whereby, as Newton becomes 'human' in spite of himself, the other three become progressively more (shall we say?) 'unhuman', is a suggestion that the relationship is occasioned by the momentary coincidence of two parallel worlds. Behind the story of the Anthean's arrival on Earth there is, clearly, another story of a society's evolution through technological sophistication to a self-destruction that has left it hesitant, defenceless, stripped of its arrogance, rather in the position of primitive man fighting desperately for survival. Ironically, the man who falls to earth in search of paradise finds Man (only a stage or two behind in the autodestruct process) abandoning that paradise to reach for the stars. Small wonder, beyond the joke of his neglect of the Latin language, that Newton remains struck dumb when confronted by the motto 'Per ardua ad astra'.

The Man Who Fell to Earth does not end with a sci-fi vision of destruction; but it achieves the same effect of desolation as Newton slowly bows his head, leaving us staring at the crown of his hat like a sun that may never rise again. Having come to Earth in search of hope, he finds only the self-destruction he has already witnessed well under way again; and by a curious osmosis, the futility of his space odyssey becomes our own dangerous folly in attempting to reach, per ardua, ad astra. This process of transference is started at the very beginning of the film by the deliberate inversion of viewpoints as the Anthean arrives on Earth. Since his space-craft evidently plummeted into a lake surrounded by hills, one expects to see him climbing upwards; instead he is seen, apparently from lake-level, coming down a hill. Immediately we find ourselves standing where he was, alongside a silently watching figure, as the Anthean now walks past the camera's previous position. Who, in other words, is the observer and who the observed?

A hint is perhaps offered in the overhead shot of Newton's face as he lies down on the bench outside the jewellery store to wait for it to open. The effect, as the camera lifts away from the face, is of a rocket take-off in which we see the slowly receding Earth with new eyes, naked and defenceless. The trajectory of this rocket takes us on a voyage of discovery from familiar backwoods to distant space... or from 'Blueberry Hill' to 'Stardust'. And as the old favourites by Louis Armstrong and Artie Shaw which enclose this journey suggest, it is essentially one of nostalgia: the world we discover is the world we have lost.

Tom Milne, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1976

THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH

Directed by: Nicolas Roeg
©: Houtsnede Maatschappij N.V.
Production Company: British Lion Films
Executive Producer: Si Litvinoff
Produced by: Michael Deeley, Barry Spikings
Associate Producer: John Peverall
Production Manager: Roy Stevens
Production Accountant: Ronald Cook
Location Manager: Terence Churcher
Production Secretary: Marilyn Clarke
Assistant Director: Kip Gowans
Continuity: Sue Merry
Screenplay by: Paul Mayersberg
Initial Development by: David Cammell
From the novel by: Walter Tevis
Director of Photography: Anthony Richmond
Camera Operator: Gordon Hayman
Gaffer: Martin Evans
Electricians: Derek Suter, Michael Thomas, Harry Jackson
Stills Photographer: David James
Special Photographic Effects: P.S. Ellenshaw, Camera Effects
Special Electronic and Oceanic Effects: Desmond Briscoe, Woods Hole
Film Editor: Graeme Clifford
Assistant Editors: Rodney Glenn, Melinda Rees
Production Designer: Brian Eatwell
Property Master: Tommy Raeburn
Costume Designer: May Routh
Wardrobe Master: Mike Jarvis
Wardrobe Mistress: Janet Tebrooke
Mr Bowie's Suits Made by: Ola Hudson
Chief Make-up Artist: Linda De Vetta
Hairdresser: Martin Samuel
Musical Director: John Phillips
Original Music Recording at C.T.S. Studio: John Phillips
Sound Recordist: Robin Gregory
Dubbing Mixer: Bob Jones
Dubbing Editors: Alan Bell, Colin Miller
Stunt Arranger: Dickie Graydon
Studio: Shepperton Studios

Cast

David Bowie (*Thomas Jerome Newton*)
Rip Torn (*Nathan Bryce*)
Candy Clark (*Mary-Lou*)
Buck Henry (*Oliver Farnsworth*)
Bernie Casey (*Peters*)
Jackson D. Kane (*Professor Canutti*)
Rick Riccardo (*Trevor*)
Tony Mascia (*Arthur*)
Linda Hutton (*Elaine*)
Hilary Holland (*Jill*)
Adrienne Larussa (*Helen*)
Lilybelle Crawford (*jewellery store owner*)
Richard Breeding (*receptionist*)
Albert Nelson (*waiter*)
Peter Prouse (*Peters' associate*)
Captain James Lovell (*himself*)
Presbyterian Church Artesia N.M. (*themselves*)
Claudia Jennings (*Mrs Peters*) *

UK 1976©

139 mins

* Uncredited

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