



SOUND AND VISION

Moonage Daydream

How do you encapsulate the life of David Bowie in a way that mirrors the ingenuity, invention and creative brilliance of the man himself? Across seven feature documentaries, Brett Morgen has refined a distinctive cinematic style that layers archive material, audio recordings, image montages and innovative sound design, to draw us into the worlds of his subjects. *Moonage Daydream* represents a magnum opus of this approach. Morgen weaves, blends and manipulates footage of Bowie, drawn from the vast archive of his estate, to create a kaleidoscopic fever dream of a film that captures Bowie as performer, artist and thinker.

Stuart Brown, BFI Head of Programme and Acquisitions

There's a famous image in Nicolas Roeg's 1976 film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* in which David Bowie's character, Thomas Jerome Newton, a new arrival on the planet, is shown half-cut and hypnotised by a bank of TV screens: a Babel of channels that he's hooked on surfing. It's famous partly because of its assonance with Bowie's real-life ability to absorb and refract the proliferating media chaos of the late 20th century. It's also, you suspect, a touchstone for Brett Morgen's *Moonage Daydream*, a gloriously maximalist, often psychedelically overloaded blitz of Bowie's music, paintings, ideas, influences and interviews from across the five decades of his career.

The clips, like the hits, just keep coming. With access approved by the Bowie estate to, reportedly, millions of unseen archival items, *Moonage Daydream* is replete with new live material, which, remastered by Bowie producer Tony Visconti, sounds remarkable – an early 'All the Young Dudes' and an incandescent 'The Jean Genie' (with Jeff Beck on lead guitar) in particular. Morgen also weaves a constant pattern of visual references and samples at an almost subliminal rate of turnover: glimpses of Murnau, Keaton, Lang, Oshima, Kubrick, Roeg, flashes of Bowie's acting and paintings, and occasional bursts of animation interpreting Bowie's chords and harmonies as super-saturated blooms of colour.

Borne by this torrent, the viewer might be put in mind of Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), or even Adam Curtis's more recent rewiring of documentary's visual grammar, a hypertext of allusion and interconnection. It's of a piece with Morgen's previous work in music documentary, though – most recently *Cobain: Montage of Heck* (2015), which essentially interpreted the Nirvana singer's early artistic development through animations developed from his notebooks and mixtapes, and *Crossfire Hurricane* (2012), a kind of tone-poem collage of the Rolling Stones' first two decades.

As with those films, Morgen dispenses with the staple of almost every other music documentary: talking-head interviews. With some artists this might represent a risk, but in Bowie's case, he's said so much of interest that Morgen has more than enough material to use, and it's a pleasant change to watch a documentary not stuffed with prefabricated opinions and over-rehearsed memories. Outside voices come from Bowie's TV interviews, with figures like Dick Cavett, Valerie Singleton, Mavis Nicholson and a sneering

Russell Harty. Bowie, an actor forced in conversation to improvise, is playful but serious, shy but candid; there are none of the PR-approved laugh lines of the modern-day chat show.

As free-association, a riff in the key of Bowie, *Moonage Daydream* proceeds chronologically, but Morgen is never tied down to dry narrative, not least because almost nothing is footnoted: dates are sparse and captions and citations absent except where offered by Bowie himself.

It gives time a certain elasticity: Bowie's 1970s get the most screen time, understandable given that there are artists working today who might have based entire careers on ideas or aesthetics culled from a single year of his work in that decade. After his commercial peak in the 1980s and his marriage to Iman, Bowie's 1990s and 2000s flash past as domestic bliss and occasional prophetic comments on the internet's new forms of chaos. Morgen sensitively addresses Bowie's distant relationship with his mother and the loss of his half-brother and first inspiration, Terry, who changed his life by introducing him to Kerouac and Coltrane; but if Bowie's first wife and family (including his son, the film director Duncan Jones) are mentioned, I must have blinked.

The through-line Morgen finds in Bowie's long career and discography is ambitious, explicitly taking him at his most cosmic and existential, from the very opening quotes in which Bowie discusses Nietzsche and the disappearance of God. It's a pitch of thought I didn't initially think the film could sustain: Bowie was fascinated by the surface detail of pulp and pop culture, and the way they could articulate profound and radical ideas, but would never have presented himself as a philosopher. But Morgen threads together Bowie's recurring reflections on his own existential and even spiritual development. Trying to find meaning in a transient world; trying to find himself, or any self at all, in a string of transient identities; trying to find meaning in pleasing others and then himself again. And in his last decade and final statements, *The Next Day* (2013) and *Blackstar* (2016), we get the sense that Bowie was allowing five decades of work and art to stream through him – all channels open, like Thomas Jerome Newton.

Sam Davies, *Sight and Sound*, October 2022

MOONAGE DAYDREAM

Directed by: Brett Morgen

©: Starman Productions LLC

Presented by: Universal Pictures, Neon, BMG,

Live Nation Productions, Public Road Productions

In association with: HBO Documentary Films

Executive Producers: Kathy Rivkin Daum, Hartwig Masuch,

Justus Haerder, Michael Rapino, Heather Parry, Ryan Kroft,

Bill Zysblat, Tom Cyrana, Bill Gerber, Eileen D'Arcy,

Aisha Cohen, Debra Eisenstadt

Produced by: Brett Morgen

Archival Producer: Jessica Berman-Bogdan

Archive Consultant: Kevin Cann

Written by: Brett Morgen

Graphics by: Stefan Nadelman

Animation by: Stefan Nadelman

Edited by: Brett Morgen

Title Design: Andy Goldman

Colourist: Tyler Roth

Colour and Finish by: Company 3

Music Produced by: Tony Visconti

Music Editor: John Warhurst

Film Music Mixer: Paul Murray

Re-recording Mixers: Paul Massey, David Giammarco

Supervising Sound Editors: John Warhurst, Nina Hartstone

USA-Germany 2022©

140 mins

A Universal Pictures release

SOUND AND VISION

The Man Who Fell to Earth

Sat 3 Sep 18:10; Sun 11 Sep 18:10; Sun 18 Sep 15:00; Sat 1 Oct 20:20

Cracked Actor

Sun 4 Sep 13:50

The Hunger

Sun 4 Sep 18:20; Thu 22 Sep 20:50; Thu 29 Sep 18:00

The Kid Stays in the Picture

Tue 6 Sep 18:00 + intro by Brett Morgen; Sat 17 Sep 20:40

Cobain: Montage of Heck

Tue 6 Sep 20:15 + intro by Brett Morgen; Wed 21 Sep 20:20

Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence

Sat 10 Sep 16:00; Sun 18 Sep 18:00; Tue 4 Oct 20:30

Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me

Sat 10 Sep 20:30; Mon 12 Sep 20:20; Thu 29 Sep 20:25; Mon 3 Oct 20:20

Moonage Daydream

Opens Fri 16 Sep BFI IMAX

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