senses of cinema

CURRENT ISSUE   ABOUT US   LINKS   TOP TENS   GREAT DIRECTORS   SPECIAL DOSSIERS   WORLD POLLS   ARCHIVE   CONTACT US   DONATIONS

← Previous Post   Next Post →

An Overview of Shoot Shoot Shoot – The First Decade of the London Film-Makers' Co-operative and British Avant-Garde Film 1966-1976

George Clark	July 19, 2002	Feature Articles, Issue 21

'Shoot Shoot Shoot' is a Lux project, touring worldwide till April 2004. It will appear in Australia throughout July 2002 at the following venues: 11-16 July at the Brisbane International Film Festival; July at the Perth Film & Television Institute, Western Australia; 23 – 28 July at the Melbourne International Film Festival in association with Experimenta.

'Shoot Shoot Shoot', a retrospective showcasing British avant-garde film of the late '60s and early '70s, premiered at London's Tate Modern in May 2002. This moment marked the end of an intense period of research and exploration (spearheaded by Mark Webber and the Lux in London) and the beginning of the worldwide exposition of a hitherto overlooked period of experimental film. The season is not only a major exposition of British experimental film and filmmakers, it is also a recognition and celebration of the London Filmmakers' Co-operative, a unique collective venture. The London Film Makers Co-op, founded in 1966, was based on the Filmmakers' Cooperative founded by Jonas Mekas in New York. But the Co-op made the unique departure of operating not only as a distribution centre but also a production house with an open door. This unique institution both ignited and nourished a boom in British experimental film practice.

The retrospective brings together the diverse range of artists working throughout the UK between 1966 and 1976 into seven thematic programmes (all including 6-9 films) and the final single film programme 'The Epic Flight.' Overall, the retrospective represents all the diverse strands of filmmaking evident during this time: from the expanded cinema event of Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) to Peter Gidal's immaculate, structural *Hall* (1968/69) and the epic, fragmented odyssey of David Larcher's *Mare's Tale* (1968).

Many of the filmmakers emerged from the art schools of London, some even taught there (Malcolm Le Grice – St. Martin's, Lis Rhodes – Slade, Ann Rees-Mogg – Chelsea). A concern with the plastic nature of film and its material base unifies the group. And given most of them had backgrounds in the visual arts, a lot of their work relates to diverse movements in fine art from 'Abstract Expressionism' (*Shapes* [Annabel Nicolson, 1970]) to 'Minimalism' (*Light Music* [Lis Rhodes, 1975/77]) to 'Pop Art' (*Choke* [David Crosswaite, 1971]). The works betray an incredible power and beauty in terms of their investigation into film and an overall persistent optimism and amazement at cinema and its possibilities. Although accompanied by emerging areas in film studies (mainly structural theories favoured by such UK journals as *Screen*), the films are not scholarly or dry representations of theory. The whole idea of representation is totally at odds with the structural/materialist ideology. The films of this era are personal, applied works whose aim is never far removed from the passionate belief in cinema as a unique art form. In short, this period of film history saw a cinema of engagement rather than escapism born.

Expanded Cinema

The season opens with the 'Expanded Cinema' programme where the unique collective atmosphere of the Co-op is most tangible. Film is 'expanded' to engage with the audience, the auditorium, the projector and its beam. Works like *Take Measure* (William Raban, 1973) and *Line Describing a Cone* generate a sense of wonder at the precious and ethereal nature of film. These works locate the projector within the auditorium and directly engage the spectator by creating films that one must explore and interact with. Through this deconstruction of the spectator politics of cinema, the Co-op began its exploration into the phenomenology of cinema.

ISSUE 65 CONTENTS

Features Editor: Rolando Caputo
Festival Reports Editor: Michelle Carey
Book Reviews Editor: Wendy Haslem
Cteq Annotations & Australian Cinema Editor: Adrian Danks
Webmaster and Administrator: Rachel Brown
Social Media Editor: Hayley Inch

FOLLOW US!

TAGS

Alfred Hitchcock Andrei Tarkovsky Andrzej

The close relation of practice to exhibition at the Co-op allowed for a continual reflection on film and its presentation. Furthermore, the practice at the Co-op often reflected the conditions and facilities available. Its constantly having to relocate meant, for example, that the filmmakers had to continually re-build their studios and cinema; this continual adaptation to different spaces and configurations is evident in the economy and ingenuity of the work. Most filmmakers would also 'perform' their films, working with the projector, sound and their bodies – like the manually flashing light bulb in *Castle I* (Malcolm Le Grice, 1966).

The collective nature of the Co-op gave the artists the freedom and support they needed in order to flourish. In fact, the Co-op is often described as a laboratory, a place where artists could share and exchange ideas and techniques. Crucially, it was this atmosphere that created coherence between such a diverse group. Unlike the extended personal explorations of vision and the self by Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger or Jonas Mekas of the American avant-garde, the London Film-Makers' Co-op was less focused on the single artist, more genuinely collective and more concerned with the material of film, the phenomenology of cinema.

Optical Printer

One of the most important machines used by the Co-op was the optical printer. It allowed filmmakers to reprint and re-develop material themselves and control the speed, exposure, framing, colour, exposure, and so on, as well as facilitating superimposition, overlays, mattes, and other processes with the footage. This machine allows the expansion of small amounts of footage into longer films or studies, allowing filmmakers to work solely with found footage.

The master of the optical printer, Malcolm Le Grice best exemplifies the endless possibilities of this machine. One of the founding members of the Co-op and one of the most influential of its artists, Le Grice's work is diverse and constantly engaging. It ranges from the expanded films of *Castle I* and *Castle II* (1968), which recycle found footage into Kafkaesque hypnotic visions of ominous technological and military power best exemplified by the imperialist presence of the land and sea traversing Hovercraft in *Castle II* to the later, beautiful, but more ambient, *Berlin Horse* (1970), with a Brian Eno soundtrack (not featured in the programme). There is also the materialist, *Little Dog for Rodger* (1968), where Le Grice attempts to reprocess footage shot by his father on French 9.5mm film. In this work, Le Grice explores the fugitive nature of memory and its documents. Finally his most powerful and understated film is *Tallia* (1968), which combines the quick editing and symphonic structure of the longer films but with a restrain and subtlety only glimpsed in the others. *Tallia* is above all about the mythical relation and interaction between black and white, night and day. With repeated frames within frames of light or dark that burst onto the screen, villages at night are transformed into constellations and a sinister but artificial thunderstorm is created via quick editing. *Tallia* is completely silent, its symphonic structure and its explosive fragments of images remind one of Stan Brakhage. The long pauses between the enigmatic flourishes help to create the overall feeling of absence or loss. The film is about the 'ungraspable' or 'fugitive' that characterises a lot of Le Grice's work but which is at its most sublime here.

Other examples of the optical printer include the densely superimposed film *Zoom Lapse* (John Du Cane, 1975), which has an obsessive use of windows and frames that is recurrent throughout the retrospective – a tendency aptly labelled by Roger Hammond while introducing a programme as "Window Metaphysics." Another example is *At the Academy* (Guy Sherwin, 1974), which employs dense overlays that give the impression of depth and relief to the formal black and white shapes, an ironic reprocessing of the famous Academy Cinema (London) film leader.

Processing and Development

Many of the films featured emphasise the processes of film, often with found-footage, re-developing the material to explore the flow of information involved in creating the central illusion of movement in cinema. The films go on to destabilise this seamless illusion and expose it as a delicate balancing act between the material and our perception. *Shepard's Bush* (Mike Legget, 1971) takes a materialist/structural approach to this facet of our perception, by repeatedly reprocessing the same bit of footage. The footage is re-printed a little brighter each time, going from complete darkness to a white screen. The emphasis is removed from the footage and placed on the relation between the elements and the transformation that is taking place. *Shepard's Bush* derives its power from presenting the possibilities of the footage, and never an absolute version. The difficulties in deciphering this reprocessed footage that we hope will emerge in a definitive form turns the experience from anticipation and longing to anxiety and nostalgia as one slowly realises that maybe you missed the absolute version you were waiting for. This struggle to decipher the material and the lack of resolution draws one to question what it is we are looking for. The film's powerful effect is indivisible from its excellent soundtrack, which is composed of organ notes that slowly descend in pitch from an initial major shift to the following minor shifts, and down into sounds too low for the speakers and our ears. The resultant experience is one of loss, in particular, the loss of the innocence of our perception that has been irreversibly re-aligned.

Other examples of the redevelopment of the same footage include *Shower Proof* (Fred Drummond, 1968), where a repeated event is printed on high contrast film and flows between legibility and abstraction. In *The Silver Surfer* (Mike Dunford, 1972), the obscuring of the visual information renders the elusive and lyrical figure near indecipherable, as he glides and floats through a sea of grain and dirt.

Time and Duration

Time and duration are key concerns of many of the films featured, and part of the re-claimed subject of film by the avant-garde (from Andy Warhol to Chantel Akerman). The most powerful and arresting treatment of time and duration is *River Yar* (William Raban & Chris Welsby, 1972). This film engages with landscape and environment, themes expanded upon in Chris Welsby's repeated attempts to create a harmony between natural or organic cycles and the mechanics and cycles involved in film. He states his wish is to create a synthesis between these two modes, mechanical and natural (what he terms intellectual and organic) – from *Wind Vane* (Chris Welsby, 1972), where the camera is mounted on a wind directed tripod, to *Forest Bay II* (Chris Welsby, 1973), where the cycle of the tide is set against the time-lapse cycle of the revolving camera. *River Yar* is a lengthy study of duration and cycles, employing time-lapse photography (Willam Raban pioneered this technique at the Co-op with other films like *Broad Walk* [1972]) and two-screen projection (a whole programme, 'Two Screen-Films,' is dedicated to films that employ two 16mm projectors, projecting side by side onto the screen.)

River Yar employs time-lapse photography to accelerate 24 hrs to last only one minute. From a fixed vantage point, we watch an open landscape – distant hills, an estuary on the left of the screen, a meadow on the right – speed from one dawn to the next. (The sound is recorded at 4 points in the day for 15 secs.) The day's cycle, depicted on one screen – the sun rising, the early mist, the tide rising and falling, the people and animals in the field, workers on the bank – is juxtaposed by a 'real-time dawn' on the other screen. This juxtaposition is hard to perceive, as the light of dawn gradually illuminates the screen. The imperceptible pace of the 'real time' dawn is mesmerising in its stillness, next to the rapid progress of the day on the other screen. *River Yar* is an utterly moving and poignant evocation of time, the seasons, and cycles of day and night, as well as a successful experiment in drawing one to reflect on the time spent recording the footage and the time spent watching it. This engagement in the representation of time in film and in the process of viewing film is no more powerfully evocated than here. Tremendous.

The fascination with landscape and the ethereality of time is also explored in *Sheet* (Ian Breakwell & Mike Leggett, 1970). Here the spectator's eye is focused by the insertion of a white sheet in the image. *Sheet*, which is one of the few films featured in the season that explores London's streets and buildings at that time, succeeds in leading the viewer to engage with place, atmosphere and duration. In John Smith's slightly uncharacteristic but not unaccomplished film *Leading Light* (1975) he employs 'time lapse' and 'real time' photography to follow sunlight around his room, and so explores the confines of just four walls "by showing how many rooms the camera can make from just one." (A.L.)

Sound and Image

Many of the films are silent (some even projected at the silent cinema speed of 18fps) but there is also a distinct interest in the relation of sound and/or music to image. From the pioneer of sound driven film, Lis Rhodes, to the 'Neu' scored *Hand Grenade* (Gill Eartherly, 1971), the use of sound is no less diverse or accomplished than the image. Sound was considered an essential element of film and the Co-op never failed to engage with its possibilities in their exploration of the mechanics of cinema (the sound of the projector was often considered essential.) Sound was also considered integral to the event of cinema, and was always present in the performances which the Co-op often held – from screenings with live music and poetry reading to fund raising concerts with Pink Floyd.

Lis Rhodes is one of the most unique and duly celebrated filmmakers to emerge from the Co-op, and is best represented here by her 'Expanded Cinema' piece *Light Music*. The film is a minimalist testimony to the importance, power and centrality of sound in film. It employs two projectors (to be set in any configuration; in London the beams were projected across each other to the opposite sides of the room) that project simultaneously across a room filled with smoke. Here the spectator's omniscient vantage

point is disrupted, and the beams dissecting the room are equally important as the images on the wall and the sound. In Rhodes' film, the soundtrack and images are simultaneously generated, that is, the black and white horizontal and vertical lines of the images were printed onto the optical track of the film so that they literally generate the soundtrack. This strange harmony between sound and image explains the work but at the same time does nothing to explain its tremendous effect. This central formal relationship between image and sound leaves endless possibilities for the film that presents itself as incomplete, as a brief example of the possibilities of optical sound. But the impossibility of completion or conclusion to the infinite structural possibilities of the film are what makes the work so uniquely exciting and fascinating as it attempts to redefine the 'meaning' and the experience of cinema. *Light Music* is anti-authorial and democratic in its construction and aim, but wholly arresting in its sheer commitment to the formal possibilities of cinema.

The other Rhodes film featured is the short colour film *Dresden Dynamo* (1974). Sound is also used to hypnotic effect in the evocative and dreamlike *Versailles I & II* (Chris Garratt 1976). In the overlaid organ sounds in

Phased Time 2 (David Hall, 1974), sound and image are directly attached in the sense that when an image overlays another, an organ note overlays another organ note to create an unnerving portrait of a room suspended in time. The relation of sound and image is beautifully subverted in the famous *Girl Chewing Gum* (John Smith, 1976), an extended riff on 'narration,' authorship and the control of the image and audience (like much of John Smith's work from *Associations* [1975] to *OM* [1986], both not featured in the programme).

The Still within Film

The use of found footage and reprocessing turns the spectator into a searcher and film into the still image. Like Roland Barthes' concept of the *punctum* in photography, we enter film as we do a photograph, and the image comes alive when it dies and freezes. This relation to the mechanical reproduction of reality in film and photography is beautifully developed in the sublime *Mechanical Ballet* (David Parson, 1975), a two-screen film of the reprocessed footage of a simple car stunt. The clichéd stunt of a car spinning on its roof from a ramp is reprocessed with near-subliminal editing as well as being slowed down, inverted, re-framed, reversed and repeated to align the spectacle of this stunt and with the spectacle of cinema. The footage is both deconstructed and rebuilt along with the film's central illusion of time and space, re-establishing the magic of this car suspended in the air creating its own raw mechanical/cinematic beauty.

This search and deconstruction also characterised the film *Dirty* (Stephen Dwoskin, 1965/71). Stephen Dwoskin was one of the first members of the Co-op. He emerged with Jeff Keen (one of the earliest independent UK filmmakers) and Anthony Blach from the counter-culture of the 1960s. His film explores a few minutes of footage involving two women, reframing the image till the black and white grain takes over, leaving the movements and forms to emerge out of the sea of grain. The close reworking engages with the spectator and filmmakers' proximity to the subject, later explored in the intensely, almost intimidatingly intimate *Moment* (Stephen Dwoskin, 1970).

The still frames that make up film are extracted and explored in *Muybridge Film* (Anna Rees Mogg, 1975), dedicated to the pioneer of motion photography. This film charts the permutations of the spectacle of a man doing a cartwheel. The playful, vivid colour film *Still Life* (Jenny Okun, 1976), like the other colour films in the programme, explores colour theory in a painterly fashion. A disembodied painter slowly doctors the negative colour image of fruit laid on a table; the fruit is painted and rearranged in an ironic but sublime confusing of colour representations.

Structural/Materialist

The exploration of the material or phenomenology of film is lead both in practice and theory by Peter Gidal. His films, mesmerising and solid expositions of the process involved in film and spectatorship, range from the crushingly restrained *Hall* that destroys the representational possibilities of reading the film by repeating exactly the duration and blemishes that hinted at a possible narrative or event in the first cycle to *Key* (1968), which examines the planes of focus or resolution essential to deciphering a film image. The detailed deconstruction of film is encapsulated in *Window Box* (Roger Hammonds, 1971), which moves in and out of an indistinguishable reflection on a window, forcing the viewer to abandon the hope of resolution or discovery and engage with the examination of focus and distance. The realignment and engagement with the process and mechanism of film and spectatorship is reached with difficultly, but the films are inspiring in their dedication to cinema's ability to be non-representational (of an event, narrative, psychology or a theory) and to posses within it, like modernist abstract painting, "their mystification and their demystification" (Peter Gidal).
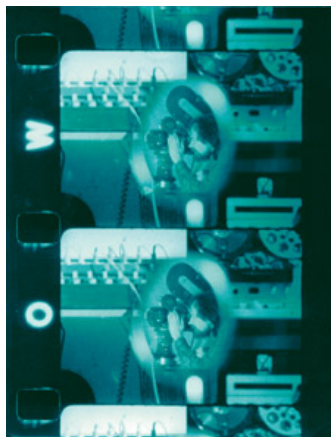
David Crosswaith's *The Man With a Movie Camera* (1973) attempts a material and structural reflection on film and filming through examining the illusion of film. Through the meticulous chorography of mirrors, focal length, zoom and sound, we are drawn towards an awareness of the act of filming as well as the complex possibilities and layers of meaning and action possible on the screen. Here the event is the act of filming; every effect or change is explained since we can see the camera operator affecting the film. And so we engage with the processes that go into the construction of film; we are involved and engaged with the construction of the illusion in the film rather than lost within it.

The Epic Journey

'Shoot Shoot Shoot' finishes with a suitably grand and all encompassing film, *Mare's Tail*, by one of the independent mavericks of British cinema, David Larcher. It is utterly affirming and engrossing in its scale and breadth but also in its intimacy and tenderness, focused as it is on a creation myth that moves from the strange swarming birds to the birth of the filmmaker's child. *Mare's Tail* delves into the world where the camera acts as a protagonist and within its loose indefinable structure one can always find oneself.

It is a fitting conclusion to an inspiring, diverse and incredibly accomplished season of films that testifies to the incredible possibilities of Cinema, from creation to exhibition. With a film like *Mare's Tale*, a key success has been achieved. Here is a legendary, but almost forgotten film that has been dragged from the recesses of time

and allowed to shine in the full critical and historical context of the season. With this season, like the films, a complete synthesis of passion, research, theory and experimentation has managed to collect and re-ignite a core period of experimental cinema.

Bibliography

Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida*, London: Vintage, 1993

Gidal, Peter, (ed) *Structural Film*, London: BFI, 1976

Rees, A.L., *A History of Experimental Film and Video*, London: BFI, 1999

About the Author

George Clark is a writer, curator and artist. He currently works on touring programs of artists' film and video at the Independent Cinema Office.

Comments are closed.

FILM
VICTORIA

Back to Top