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British Avant Garde Film*

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Avant garde film is predominantly European. This fact seems sometimes to be forgotten both in the United States and in Europe. The origins of the work as well as the influences transmitted in the '50s and '60s were via European painters, sculptors, composers, filmmakers, photographers. European Surrealism, Brechtian theatre, and Duchamp, influenced Abstract Expressionism, which influenced, in turns, especially early Rauschenberg, Johns, Warhol, some of which recrossed the ocean as ahistorically "new." Thus when we now see a program of, for example, British avant garde film, we must expect to see issues and problematics being dealt with that come out of that specific history and influence. Recent American writing in the past two decades has attempted to forcefully to deny this fact, and to consistently imperialize artistic production in line with North America's political/ideological aims. Often of course this process is unconscious, and is practiced amongst "liberals." In any case, current American avant garde film deals very much as it has over the past two decades, with the *image* (and with formal conundrums made into "image"), with the attempt to commoditize and patriarchalize aesthetic production-processes, and to in one way or another titillate the viewer's sense, again to constantly reproduce voyeurism. In some cases this is a derivative, a gloss of technical playing-around which could be called Capitalist Formalism, in other cases it is a decadent (and in Beth and Scott B. fascistic) "new talkie" narrative superficiality, a sort of the "underground" of basic Hollywood hegemony (with the same desires, and contents). There are naturally exceptions, whose work is rarely shown and never written about in detail by the local powers.

British avant garde film has, since the mid-sixties, been concerned with filmic processes. Influence on British production has been the history of 20th century European literature, art, film, theatre, music, radio, etc., so that early German and French avant garde films, and art, as well as British photography, radio, and literature, have had an important impact (sometimes via Eisenstein and Vertov) on the way in which montage (for example) and the element of duration has functioned as a problematic process.

(When writing of avant garde, I am not referring to British and American so-called "independent" cinema, which occasionally takes this or that aspect

of the avant garde, but rather to the work of the avant garde itself, which is, in a manner as assimilable as possible, is basically the same old narrative stuff in a manner as assimilable as possible to a pre-made audience. Such "independent film" is parasitic on aspects of the avant garde, and its conventions sit firmly within, and rely on, bourgeois narrative, and narrative-psychanalytic analysis, only on smaller budgets, but with no less megalomania).

British avant garde film as presented at the Collective by Simon Field (with help from the British Council) precisely situated itself as complexly concerned with duration, qualified/quantified, in each specific case, by the image and camera-movement. Thus the conventional and simplistic montage of images which Hollywood cinema still imposes (also via various critical exegetes) on current American avant garde film is not a concern for recent British filmmaking.

The films we saw, most made around 1979/80, deal with the filmic process of duration in such a way that questions in relation to the viewers' perceptions and the viewers' necessary working processes had to be engaged. This does not mean the films were all doing the same thing, or that all the films were "good." I would have chosen different films by each filmmaker (and added David Parsons, Joanna Millet, Mike Maziere, and at least two others). But the basic questions, and Field's explication of the tendencies, correctly brought out the issues I have mentioned, though rather than the term "personal," what these filmmakers are getting at is the inseparability, from image and sound, of subjectivity's contradictory relations, without denying objective processes and positions. British avant garde film in the last fifteen years has of course not only been influenced by the literary, theatrical, and painting histories of Europe and Britain, but also by several pre-1970s films of the Canadian filmmaker Michael Snow, and those of the Viennese filmmakers Kurt Kren and Peter Kubelka, and Birgit and Wilhelm Hein from Köln, who in turn have all been strongly influenced by the Austrian composers Schönberg and Webern, Black American jazz composers and players like Thelonious Monk, as well as the writers Gertrude Stein, Kafka, Wittgenstein, Tusholsky, Sterne, etc. And the British tendency of understatement is very evident in these films.

The use of repetition in for example Mike Leggett's best work so far, *Friday Fried* (1980-81) is formulated via the authority of a young girl's interjections and the image's constant reconstruction towards, and simultaneously against, narrativization. The sequence of images, landscapes, against the intercut durational sequence of frying eggs (an image which in England conjures up a domestic lower-middle class "scene") erupts both as endless, tedious, and humorous due to the cliché it presupposes. But the narrativizational work that must endure to make this film become closed is consistently disrupted precisely by the unexpected breaks which through voice and image disallows even any "spontaneity" to become naturalized. This process becomes the only remnant of the film, and this may disturb some viewers who expect a commodity, in spite of everything, or a fetish-object, for pleasure or displeasure, or even a negotiated ending. In Mike Leggett's *Notes*, he writes

The film *Friday Fried* mixes sound-images in a strictly procedural manner being based upon a relationship with the picture-track which itself is structured around a sequence of slide-images. Four voices narrate a

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whilst also cross-narrating with one another. During the construction of the soundtrack twelve different sources were combined without alteration to balance, tone, etc., throughout the film's 15-minute duration.

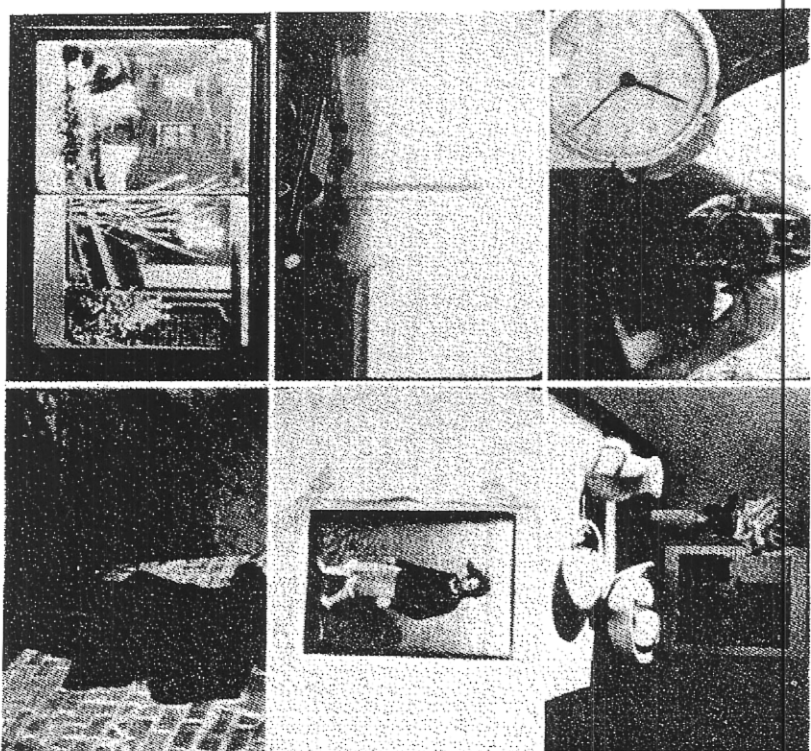
The film remains close to the stiff underdeveloped format work around duration, repetition, visual centering (frame, focus, exposure, etc.). The project extends from problems which emerge in earlier work, particularly in the fields of spoken word symbol and sound images: their order and association, by implication or direct reference, with the image track, and within the totality of the sound heard as mixture.

Guy Sherwin's three films from *Short Film Series* (1976-1980) are made up of *Eye*, *Night Train*, and *Tap*. The Kyoto-rock garden-like quietness is again the quality of understatement which these films all maintain. An infant's eye, the infant's head, shots of water from above, the movement of light in sharp streaks across the black screen... fragments which do not compose themselves into even a quasi-narrative, but which in their hypnotic filmicness demand looking, in order to begin to associate, and to disrupt any natural given to any association. It is best to quote Sherwin's notes in this case:

Short Film Series is made up of a variable number of black and white silent films, each about 3 minutes in length. The sections are kept discrete by the use of black leader, which prevents one film running into another, and avoids what might otherwise be interpreted as "dramatic" cuts. Not only is the number of films shown variable, but so is their order of presentation. Every screening can be different... the series is in continual evolutionary flux as new sections are introduced and others discarded. The overall shape of the *Short Film Series* is modular and open ended... Apart from the obvious formal constraints there are other less obvious ones at work... these are to do with subject matter, procedure, and techniques used. They are common denominators that permeate the series....

The influence of Warhol's aesthetics, and the politics of those aesthetics, rather than the Camp and at times decadent subject-matter, is evident in British work of the last fifteen years (even as transmuted in some cases via other British filmmakers). So that *Chelsea Girls* had its effects in England via a different history and a different political base, socialism, than here in the United States.

I shan't describe all the films. Lucy Pantelli's *Across the Field of Vision* shares with much recent British avant garde and experimental work a concern with the process which inculcates in the viewer the need (yet only at times the desire) to look at and throughout the frame, unstoppably, and it attempts to annihilate the dramatic interest of the ostensible subject matter, birds flying and gliding, at different speeds, from different positions of camera, against differing "backgrounds" of tonality, white to gray to dark blue. In this attempt, carefully composed durations (as opposed to perspectively oriented montage) operate. The shot-length, its duration, against and in relation to and at times seemingly "with" camera-movement, and technique (closeup, zooming, steady



Guy Sherwin's *Short Film Series*

longshot, etc., for example) makes of the cinematic continuum a denaturalized process, constantly, a collision and an anti-collision, where what is foregrounded is specific cinematic time. There are careful differences in perception of such in relation to size of profilmic event, speed of its, and/or the camera's movement. The shot to shot transformations, outside of a hierarchicalized teleology, is the materialist construct of such work. Each shot functions as a piece of time, viscerally, whilst the "content" is emptied out. That such work may fail due to the constraints of subject-matter (the drama of the flight-path, and its rhythms) does not at key moments diminish the force of the process. In other words, apart from the question of success or failure, it is within a stated prob-

cinematic questions have to be worked through filmically. Thus Pantall's brilliant *Motion Picture* works through similar and other strategies and subject-matters, and filmic identities, which work, to my mind, more successfully than *Across the Field of Vision* (others whom I respect did not find that the subject matter overwhelmed the problematizing and productivising of duration, and thus did not find that the materialist constructs were constrained by "subjectmatter" in this film). The quantitative "amount" of an operative functioning must be taken account of; that is, what worked for me in this film only at various particular moments, in clusters (due to my history of "reading" a film; a loathsome phrase, by the way), may have worked more generally (and more strongly) for others; nevertheless, the predominance of a reading, i.e., the radicality that predominates, may be in direct relation to the quantity of "such" work that one has had access to. This must be taken into account, although it can work the other way round; those without access to any experimental work may find the most radical experimental film and the most opportunistic work "easy" one equally impossible. (An excellent discussion, by the way, of *Motion Picture*, can be found in *Undercut* 5, by Michael Maziere.) All this though also has to do with subjectivity in a way, so that only within the context of a whole series of British current work can such issues become clarified productively, and this is one of the strengths of the program we saw: to allow the audience in New York to begin to do that. It is an experimental film program. The above mentioned film journal, *Undercut*, the 7th issue of which has just appeared (it is quarterly), regularly deals with such questions of current practice, and also deals with works from Europe and the United States, from such a perspective of aesthetico-political practice and theory, in a way that no other film-journal does, i.e., it is both polemical, and self-critical, and theoretical, so that there isn't a false unification of writers-filmmakers involved. Nor is it opportunistic and/or completely eclectic and positionless (supposedly positionless) which is the major problem of October and most cultural journals in the United States (a problem vehemently emulated by the British journal *Frameworks*, in the individualistic self interest of its editorial clique).

Nicky Hamlyn's *Not To See Again* (1980) works, as do so many current British films, with sound in as complex a manner as image, where the need to listen whilst deciphering, and attempting to decipher sound (often against the "meaning" the simultaneous image is "giving"), forces a work by the viewer that disallows consumption and satisfaction. The process of work is labored in sound and image, but it is not "about" that; it does not illustrate that; it produces it in and through the viewer. Thus for example the moment of sound, a fragment (of a sentence) is clearly understood and then "lost" (similar to the way a radio is tuned). The conjunction with the "underlying" image is formulated as a construction which gives no basis to the synchronicity which the viewer imposes or attempts to impose. At the same time, this film presents discrete shots, as does Margaret Tait's *Aerial* (1974), in such a way that narrative is consistently assumed and presumed, but then, rather than deconstructed, simply made, via anti-hierarchical strategies, impossible. This film by Hamlyn is not one I would have chosen because of its to my mind unresolved (or not productively unresolved) use of the naked body (a problem I have with many

some these days) making a shot which is comparatively much too lengthy for its specificity as a shot to work against or in relation to the complexity of the film as such; it tends to become a separate documentary discourse, thereby setting up a secondary category of unresolvedness. Still, this film situates itself against films which unproblematically give a series of images and sounds and then articulate (after the fact, or as "sound over") some "political" rationale. In that sense, Hamlyn's work is truly experimental and, again, the problems are (only) such within an area that is self-denied and which this film helps to define. His more recent films have gone much further towards extending these filmic positions rigorously.

Tait's work, *Aerial* (1974) completely disregards the conventional notions of what is necessary for a domestic narrative, and in fact gives the domestic its space and place outside of narrative, yet also outside of any seemingly homogeneous subjectivity. By not assuming such homogeneity her practice consistently builds up, the way the best writing (and least popular, as it happens) of Jean Rhys, for example, does, a space where the "subjectivity" of image-production and its "objective" cinematic existence are in inseparable material existence, which through that language, memory, desire, aesthetics attempt to find their, often contradictory, moments. This work is as succinct as Webern, as un-idiosyncratic though not "non-objective." (A piece of fiction entitled *Foreign Films* by Jane Warrick, whose aesthetic concerns at times overlap, can be found in *Undercut* 6.)



Pictures on Pink Paper by Lis Rhodes

film that must be taken up seriously soon, or else the same thing will happen that happened with *Light Reading*, which is that most people within this area of interest, other than in Britain, will not know of, or see, it, the way many of those engaged in sexual politics remain unknowing of Christine DePly's *The Main Enemy* and *A Materialist Feminism Is Possible*. Lis Rhodes has written

Change things—
and they have to change
she laughed—with the best will in the world
they can't do it
and they don't have the best will in the world.

and

The apparent inevitability of the natural and immutability of the normal are held neatly in place by those to whom such an order is of advantage. *Pictures on Pink Paper* is women talking, thinking aloud and questioning this order; a critique of past experiences and ways of thinking, interwoven with images and sounds from places remembered.

There are numerous threads and layers, of possibilities and contradictions. *Pictures on Pink Paper* moves between what is heard and what might be spoken; was known and is now seen.

For me as a man it was the first film to which I (as) a man cannot respond; this is in no way dismissive; it is the next step after *Light Reading*, which is one of the most important films of the last decade. *Pictures on Pink Paper* seems to have the position of excluding men in a way which does not allow them to interpret it, analyze it, or "deal productively with it." So that, for once, a position of political power is taken by the direction in which (this) film is aimed, namely, to demand a specific kind of aesthetic/political context. I am in a complex situation with such a film: strong respect for the specific work at hand, its aesthetic politics, its mode of operation, its strategies, and its power. I am in solidarity with its, in my view, disavowance of male discourse. Anti-patriarchal film is necessary. But the problem is that in stating that, I (as a male) may yet again be trying to cover the meanings of the film, to somehow critically come to terms with it in a way which, through my solidarity, reimposes a male's voice and position. The fear of becoming co-optive of the film makes me not want to write anything, something I've been severely criticized for. Yet I feel it (rightly) stops men from writing anything, unless they are politically against it. And I have to admit that I am reacting this way due to my specific history and my political position, and do not want to say that that is how other men will react, nor do I want to say that this was the intention of the filmmaker Lis Rhodes. The radicality of the film is, in my view, in forcing that problematic as stated.

Some Introductory Thoughts on Cidal's Films and Theories

MALCOLM LE GRICE

Like a large proportion of experimental filmmakers, Peter Cidal came to film from the background of modern painting and is of the generation which was influenced by, but sought ways out of, Abstract Expressionism. Also, like a number of filmmakers, he played a little jazz. Though he had no serious ambitions in this direction, at some time more critical attention might well be given to the significant influence which the ethics and aesthetics of jazz improvisation have had in the attention to process in art.

Cidal's first film *Room 1967* (which I knew as *Room (Double Take)*), was followed in the next two years by half a dozen films produced simultaneously with a number of written works published as articles in *Cinemantics* (1970); five essays on films by Snow, Dwoskin, Jimura, Warhol and myself in *Ark* (also in 1970) and a book on Warhol (in 1971). This pattern of film production and publication of critical/theoretical writing continues.

I first encountered Cidal's work through a screening of *Room 1967* at the Arts Laboratory, Drury Lane in '68. Though I was critical of the film's denouement—the image of a reclining man, "stoned" and smoking from a hubbub—bubble—I was particularly impressed by the slow camera movement over the unspectacular surfaces and objects of a room and even more so by the extreme device of an absolute repeat of the whole film. At that period in London, with so little work in experimental and independent film, it was particularly important to discover another filmmaker whose sensibility was sufficiently close to my own to help reinforce the more radical (and consequently least acceptable) aspects of my own work. At that time, except for some art students making tentative experiments with film, Cidal, and when I saw their work in '69, Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, were the only filmmakers whose work I felt close to aesthetically (and ideologically).

Since then, my work and Cidal's has frequently been bracketed together, most recently under the term *Structural/Materialist* (a Cidal formulation)—the bracketing being applied equally to the films and theoretical writing. This double harness has caused us both some problems, obscuring the differences between our work; nonetheless, with the level that the public critical debate has reached, I would rather have my position confused with his than with any other filmmaker. Which is to say, as the lines are drawn to date, in spite of our differences, there are considerable areas of agreement between us. In the strict sense, we have never developed a joint position nor presented any co-operative