

## ROD STONEMAN

# FILM-RELATED PRACTICE AND THE AVANT-GARDE

### I Introduction

THESE NOTES ATTEMPT to describe a number of extra-textual practices related to current avant-garde film work and to discuss modes of theoretical and institutional intervention and mediation open to independent film workers at this time. While these notes are built around a number of examples of the practice of a specific individual film-maker — Mike Leggett — they could be related to other film-making practices as well.<sup>1</sup> They are concerned with a particular tradition of avant-garde work within independent film with its particular forms and strategies of institutional work, textual deployment and contextualisation.

My concern in this article is to locate the meaning of abstract and formal work culturally — in relation to dominant forms of film-making and to recognise the terms of the production and reception of this practice. This example concerns work in art education which questions the structure and mode in which 'knowledge' is produced, displaces some discourses by introducing political and historical discourses on the production of meaning, and in this can be differentiated from other independent film work where film is used to reinforce existing positions within an audience (at political meetings, trade union meetings, women's groups and so on).

Most previous discussion of avant-garde practice has avoided consideration of the extra-textual determinants on its reception. ('As to the problems of confirmed audiences that old red herring is an old red herring' Gidal).<sup>2</sup> Screenings of avant-garde films are often accompanied by the film-maker themselves. The presence of the film's designated 'author' often tends to confirm the audience

in placing the film-maker as an intentional source of knowledge, providing, as well as technical information about the films production, resolution and closure to a reading of the film, interpreting the film for the audience.

Mike Leggett, a film-maker who left work in industrial film production and as an assistant film editor in the BBC to work in independent film, has been involved with the London Film Makers Co-op since 1969, collaborating in setting up the film-making workshop. He is presently teaching film part-time at Exeter College of Art. His most recent work, which is taken as a focus for this article, is interesting because of the ways in which his practice of accompanying the screenings of his films does not attempt to control the meanings produced by the audience but, on the contrary, works to provide other and contradictory meanings. This will be discussed below in Section II.

A rough breakdown of the screenings of Leggett's films in the period 1975-78 confirms the common assumptions about the traditional location and placement of avant-garde work within the formal education system: 45% Educational venues; 25% Galleries and museums; 25% Public venues (Film societies, cinemas etc); 5% Festivals. Art colleges dominate as an institutional base both because they provide venues for screenings as well as employment for a number of film-makers including Leggett. The problems of the organisation of international circulation and distribution of avant-garde films lead to the situation where the majority of screenings abroad take place as part of tours accompanied by the film-maker (USA 1976) or in other 'supportive' contexts such as *A perspective on English Avant-Garde Films* (Arts Council Touring exhibition) or package tours accompanied by other film-makers (Australia 1975, Sweden 1977).

## II 'Sheepman & the Sheared', notes on the films

What follows is a provisional inventory of *Sheepman & the Sheared* — a necessary description of the sections of a film which has not been widely seen, followed by an elaboration of some of their structural elements. This examination of some elements of a textual system — Leggett's films — precedes the attempt to describe their function when placed in relation (to each other and) to various discursive contexts. The analysis of meaning production must start from an understanding of the interaction of text, context and reader as relative and dialectical ('the reading of a film is neither constrained absolutely, nor free absolutely, but historical' Stephen Heath).

*Sheep* — remains of a cut roll of rushes; images of sheep, splices, grease pencil marks, flash frames, marker boards and man talking to camera without sound (3 minutes).

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1 A number of related independent film projects could be instanced as problematising the articulation of discourses and utilising notions of specific exhibition use: *Song of the Shirt*, Film History Workshop; '36 to 77, Berwick Street Collective; *Justine*, Film Work Group.

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2 Modified quotation from *Wide Angle* vol 2 no 4, 1978, p 86.

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*Sheepman* — assembly of same found footage plus more and including images of humans, motor cars and other machines. Governed by a constant 12 frame/half-second linear measurement of acetate and functioning as the durational basis for the selection and re-ordering of material originally destined to be ordered according to the dictates of an explanatory script (10 minutes).

*Window* — the camera and operator record 40 seconds of film each week throughout a period of 12 months from the same vantage point; each period finishes with the camera framing the area in front of the window in the same way as the shot commenced. Selection of the part of the area with the use of a zoom lens and camera movement or decision about the time of day (or even day itself), and precise length of run were not pre-determined. The footage obtained is assembled in the order of shooting, (April 1973-74), the cut from one shot to the next being preceded and followed by a series of single black frames(\*) spaced 12 frames apart: \*12\*12\*12\*12 cut \*12\*12\*. A twenty minute continuous sound recording made at the same window is printed twice on to the ungraded final print with a five minute gap before the repeat (45 minutes).

*Film Lane* — film is shot from a moving vehicle; from its roof pointing forward, from its rear pointing backwards. This occurs on two occasions: the summer of 1973 and the winter of 1974. The camera runs at either 24 or 12 frames per second. The film is assembled according to pre-determined factors: (i) the 12 frame basis observed in the *Sheepman* section; (ii) a double binary — alternating apparent movement away from and towards the surface of the screen (a function relying on the perception of successive frames), and alternation between opposing seasonal periods (a function relying on the perception of a single frame); (iii) combinations of one or other of these (18 minutes).

*Farm* — an assembly of eight rolls of film each in their different ways examining the spatial relations of the planes of the profilmic object to the planes of film in the camera and projector — the walls of a barn, the surface of a tilled field, the surface of a screen bearing the image of a wall in movement, the screen with an image of movement towards moving animals, movement of tractor on which a moving camera is mounted (25 minutes).

*Blue Plus Green Plus Red* — colour originating from the sky, the grass and berries, printed through a system of graphic loops designed to permutate the mixing of these three colours basic to the maintenance of the illusion of colour in film emulsion. The primaries, blue, green and red, produce magenta, cyan and yellow; and white as a hue shift (15 minutes).

*Sheepwoman* — returns to the camera image of *Sheepman* together with control of camera and then examines through systematic application the resultant image in conjunction with

synchronous/non-synchronous sound and written word image (20 minutes).

*Sheepman & the Sheared* is a large-scale project (2½ hours if the 7 parts are projected consecutively and continuously), the separate parts of which involve various articulations of related concerns — interdependent textual work on systemic organisation within a broadly structuralist/minimalist aesthetic inflected by the landscape genre . . . The size and shape of the text as a whole indicates its likely audience and its provenance — a national/cultural inflection of avant-garde work in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The meaning of the film includes its relation to other texts, it can be (and is) discussed as the work of an individual, but it should also be seen to be part of a wider process such as the discussions and productions of films among Co-op film-makers at this time.

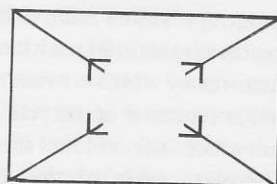
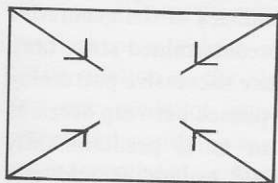
#### 'Film Lane'

Deke Dusinberre has described the constitutive elements of the landscape genre within the English avant-garde film:

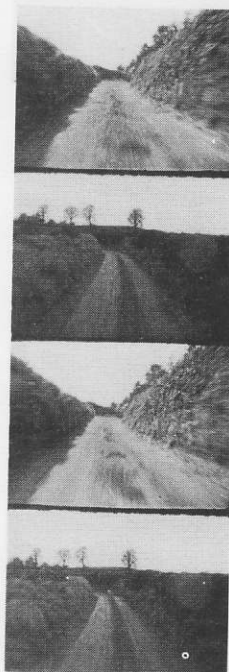
*Landscape films . . . assert the illusionism of cinema through the sensuality of landscape imagery, and simultaneously assert the material nature of the representational process which sustains the illusion.*<sup>3</sup>

The operations of the text counter the expressive and connotative meanings generated by traditional landscape art.

The construction of a unified spectator position in traditional landscape painting (ie, before Cezanne) through perspectival representation is countered in *Film Lane* which utilises a mode of representation which both demands and undermines the viewer's conscious construction of spatial relations. The alternation/inversion of separate tracking shots plays on the unstable relation between the picture surface and signified/fictive space. The interruption of frame to frame continuity becomes a disruption and a destabilisation of perspectival space which is intensified by the directional axes of the image (the edges of the hedges and the road) which focus on a central vanishing point.



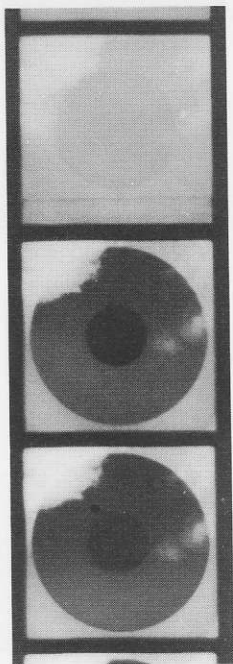
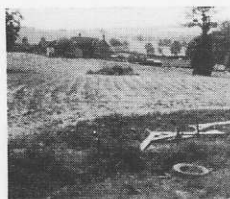
3 Deke Dusinberre, 'St George in the Forest: the English Avant-Garde', *Afterimage* no 6, Summer 1976.





- 4 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Acinema', *Wide Angle* vol 2 no 3, 1978.

- 5 cf SM Eisenstein, 'The Dynamic Square', *Film Essays* Jay Leyda (ed), London 1968.



A form emphasising that the signification of space is constituted within temporal parameters, to adapt a phrase of Lyotard's

*Movement . . . is given to the eye of the spectator for what it is — a simple temporal difference in the visual field.*<sup>4</sup>

#### 'Window'

The investigation of perspectival signification, temporality and its relation to subject positioning is continued in *Window* Section on an extended scale. The repeated camera operations in the approximately 40 second units have the same relation to each other as separate frames (and separate sections): related difference. Their diachronic relations involve the changing conditions of ambient light over the year. The individual units are linear symmetrical structures (palindromes), each returning to the same point of departure. Their correspondence is constituted by a serial articulation of similarities and dissimilarities. Each unit performs and repeats a journey out into depth, the dimensions of which are challenged as they are constructed. The strategy of repetition (play of identity and difference) produces a focus on the detail of the profilmic event and the camera operation. The camera movement makes some attempt to decentre visual space by what can only be described as non-anthropocentric zooming — veering off the individuals occasionally glimpsed in long shot, disrupting implicit, and culturally determined, expectations which demand that visual organisation is centred on the human form if possible . . . 'Attempts were made to scan the view in a mechanical, non-responsive way' or more precisely non-responsive to the human figure. (Leggett's post-production analytical notes go on to suggest that this attempt was not pursued sufficiently to 'maintain an observational tension'.)

#### 'Blue Plus Green Plus Red'

*Blue Plus Green Plus Red* plays on the 'origination' of the colour from directly filmed, primary colour natural sources (berries, sky, grass) and filter assisted modification of these colours in the printing process to create complimentary colours through the addition/combination of the primaries. The denotative functions of the individual colours are minimised by their duration and ring permutation — a succession of concentric circles within a square frame, as each colour is seen in relation to others. The resultant pattern/redundancy/variation is not arbitrary in principle, the variable loop length providing relative determinacy of the generative system (apparently aleatoric but within a predetermined structure). Perceptual structures by which we read/induce successive patterning seem to produce a repeated unit/cycle and pauses between sections of the film in which the colour seems to move predominantly towards the circular centre of the 'dynamic square' frame<sup>5</sup> and to a lesser extent away from it.

### 'Sheepwoman'

*Sheepwoman* challenges the hierarchical ordering of the different registers of discourse in the dominant mode of representation by the separation and recombination of signifying elements:

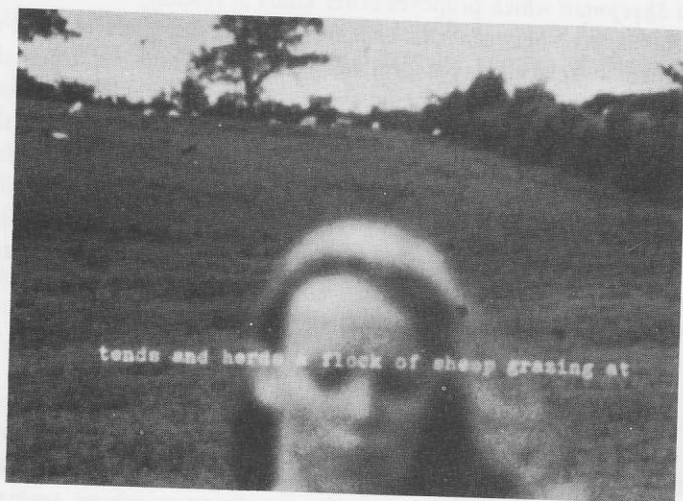
Sound (of voice);

Image (of speaker);

Sub-title,

and their articulation through the interaction of repeated shots foregrounding a number of related factors:

- 1) Shot size, degree of facial closeness (determination of sync/non-sync).



- 2) Non-anthropocentric depth of field and focus.

- 3) Relation of the texts — The subtitle text initially follows the sound of the recited text and then preceeds it, but in both cases exceeds it by introducing indirectly related material, referring to off-screen space, which is not in the aural text.

The complex construction of sectional and intersectional relations is based on a series of shifts involving recombinations of elements; say, *Blue Plus Green Plus Red* to *Sheepwoman* — both sections involving the combination and organisation of elements through the interaction of repeated material, by loop permutation in *Blue Plus Green Plus Red* and by the repetition of three prints of the (same) two takes in *Sheepwoman*.

When shown by itself *Blue Plus Green Plus Red* tends to be read as pure colour abstraction, but this reading is countered by its relation to the *Sheepwoman* section which involves a related systemic mode of organisation in a more complex diverse and referential signifying system. In fact *Sheepwoman* fulfils the requirement formulated in Burch's *Theory of Film Practice*<sup>6</sup> to define and

6 Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, London 1973.

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- 7 A question raised by, among others, Anne Cottringer, 'Three Films of Michael Snow: the Politics of the Avant-Garde', unpublished Slade Diploma Thesis, University College London, 1976; Mick Eaton, 'The Avant-Garde and Narrative', *Screen* vol 19 no 2, Summer 1978; Phillip Drummond, 'Notions of Avant-Garde Cinema', *Film as Film*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979.
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- 8 Mike Leggett, written reply to a question on the political functions of 'formal' film posed at a screening in San Francisco State University in October 1976.
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separate the components of film form to allow their rigorous articulation by para-serial principles. The two sections constitute different modes of signification which are combined as related paradigms of avant-garde practice within a heterogeneous text. Their conjunction in the same text counters the traditional aesthetics of the fully integrated text in which all of the elements appear to be functioning economically together in a self-contained structure ('the organic whole') with a maximum degree of continuity, economy, coherence and linearity — both within and between the individual sections. The appearance of self-sufficiency and containment generated by a 'classic' text is opposed by a work like *Sheepman* which proposes other kinds of reading.

The 'space' between the elements of the film can be said to produce a 'relational perspective' — shifting concern from the material or conceptual elements themselves to the relations between them. Individual elements cannot be considered in isolation from the network of relations in which they are held, and the way they are articulated together in specific instances. The function of this separation can be theorised in terms of spectator activity — the relative degree of consciousness of mental functioning, an awareness of construction and positionality in the structuration of a differentiated field:

similarity/continuity : difference/discontinuity.

A signifying practice based on the production of conscious differences, interconnections (analysis) between elements can lead to the questioning of the unifying, totalising positions normally constructed for and by the spectator in narrative film and of the context of that operation. The notion of film as an operation or practice in which signification is produced by a spectator in relation to a text, a process of meaning production which also involves a reciprocal subject construction, has led to the repeatedly<sup>7</sup> raised question — as to the mode of articulation of the subject in avant-garde filmic practices.

Discontinuities within and between sections in *Sheepman & the Sheared* problematise the relation of the spectator to the film and therefore go some way towards exposing the contradictions of the dominant and institutional form of that relationship.

The work of the film can provide knowledge of a process, the reader/text relationship is not constituted in purely phenomenological terms — mediated experience rather than immediate experience. Its production involved an interest in 'decisions affecting the relationship of the phenomena or artifact to those who experience it' and how it is placed in aesthetic discourse, 'politics cannot be contained within an artifact ...',<sup>8</sup> in fact the politicisation of the question of representation and its inscription in history.

*It's this reintroduction of difference, unmaking subject identities to produce a critical knowledge, which renders modernism, like psychoanalysis (provisionally) impossible for the institution; it tips education towards anarchy, the possible space of other orders.<sup>9</sup>*

*Sheepman* is a largely systemic work and offers a different inflection of the conception and role of the film-maker — the author is no longer seen as the creative source but as an effect of the film text. Working with a definition of systemic as a methodical/consistent arrangement (arrangement as either object or process), the features of systemic work are:

- 1) Retrievable generative system which accounts for the consistent arrangement of the maximum number of parameters (measurable factors).
- 2) Clear, consistent formal relations.
- 3) Signification which exposes its own process of production.
- 4) Replacement of spatio-temporal reference (representation of another time and place) with structures which stress their own time and place.

These features involve an extension of (the notion of) rationality — the 'unconscious' elements are worked over by a conscious process on the part of the film viewer, foregrounding the decisions involved in spatio-temporal articulation and material organisation ('stressing the structures it is based upon').<sup>10</sup> This textual practice can also be said to offer a different articulation of the maker 'outside' the work, affecting one of the elements central to the relationship of the text to the spectator — often somewhat overdetermined by aesthetic critical discourses. This relates to the Constructivist notion of the 'art worker' as a scientific experimenter, which counters idealist ideology of the artist as transcendent individual who occupies a position outside (and above) society and its historical process.<sup>11</sup>

#### Exhibition/Accompaniment

The insistence, among avant-garde film-makers, on control of film distribution is often extended to involvement in the circulation of the discourses within which a textual practice functions.

The critical context involves a series of discourses which serve to interpret, mediate and locate the film. They offer the terms in which the text can be read. A work of art, like any other cultural and social discourse, has no meaning outside of its context and a number of complex and reciprocal determinations operate at the point of meaning production.

The programme note for the screening of *Sheepman* in 'Perspectives on British Avant-Garde Film' exhibition, organised by the Arts Council in 1977 at the Hayward Gallery, outlined 'two of the

<sup>9</sup> Paul Abbott, 'Authority', *Screen* Summer 1979, vol 20 no 2, p 53.

<sup>10</sup> As Jorge Dana has suggested 'A systematic is the inscription of a passage of a work which never arrives at an authority' quoted in Anne Cottringer, op cit, p 56.

<sup>11</sup> This position has been developed by Birgit Hein in 'Return to Reason', *Studio International*, November/December 1975 and 'The Avant-Garde and Politics', *Millennium* vol 1 no 2, Spring/Summer 1978



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- 12 Ben Brewster, 'Structural Film Anthology' *Screen*, Winter 1976/77, vol 17 no 4, p 120.
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- 13 cf Jurgen Habermas, 'Conservatism and Capitalist Crisis', *New Left Review* no 115, May/June 1979.
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directions in which an overall continuity might be traced across the disparateness of the seven parts: formal strategies and autobiography... the second detailing 'the personal threads and biographical correlations' which could be drawn from the work. The film-maker responded to counter this reading denying the 'presence of a particular personality' behind the work and attacking the implications of an organisation of the diverse elements around the central (and transcendent) consciousness of the avant-garde *auteur* implying that the position from which these materials can be seen to cohere (overall continuity) is that of the selective, organising and intentional author. Whilst they were assembled by the author the unifying, totalising position (from which the interconnections are made) can be seen to be that of the film-viewer. Confirming the film as the unproblematic product of a transcendental subject, and the ideologically dominant idea that a film is 'about' its maker, leads to the production of centred, closed readings.

Leggett's recognition that 'notes carry considerable weight and influence in the way they affect a film viewing' indicates the role of the general and specific frames of cultural reference within which any spectator exists.

There is no absolute guarantee in the text of a systemic film that it is not recuperable into the romantic and idealist categories of criticism such as the mystique of personal creation and individual vision. However that is not to agree with Ben Brewster's assertion that the 'marked attempt to suppress personal intervention in the process . . . merely re-establishes the artist as object of identification.'<sup>12</sup> The conflict over the terms in which a text is posed indicates the importance of the extension of representational contestation to the areas of exhibition/reception. In terms of the avant-garde film the aesthetic discourse can be seen to function to hold and neutralise the political or theoretical impact of a text. Aestheticisation is one of the primary mechanisms of cultural integration — the way in which oppositional elements of cultural practice are subdued and controlled — displaced into marginal sectors of the system.<sup>13</sup>

This process is exemplified by the programme note in the National Film Theatre booklet for the screening of *Blackbird Descending* at the London Film Festival in 1977:

*One of the most accessible films to come out of the experimental area of cinematic exploration in recent years. The secret of its appeal is that it engages the viewer's curiosity and then challenges him [sic] to remember, really remember exactly what he has seen and heard. It assumes that people can have fun at the same time as they are absorbing an analysis of how time and space are constructed in the cinema.*

What resistances may be offered to the incredibly flexible order of an ideology which is able to accommodate and integrate everything from Brakhage to *Jaws*?

### III 'IMAGE con TEXT'

Discussion of the political use of 'formal' film can start from Ian Connell's statement that 'texts can be pulled into more or less any ideological space, they can be mobilised for diverse and even contradictory critical projects.'<sup>14</sup> Conjunctural analysis can lead to that mobilisation of a signifying practice for a defined usage and place — a certain type of discourse that engages and opposes in a certain field of knowledge. Avant-garde work can be used in a context that disrupts the continuities and exposes contradictions in academic discourse.

Since the completion of *Sheepman & the Sheared Leggett* has been presenting work in the form of an illustrated presentation using tape and slide as a means of providing a background to the films shown which are described as the 'determined residue' of a range of activities in a specific field of enquiry. It is a format which, in conjunction with discussion, seems to be particularly effective with students and film groups — an appropriate form of presentation given the largely educational context in which the work has generally been placed. The inclusion of material on the production and reception of the films goes outside the implicit criteria of pertinence which govern discourses operative in art institutions, self-contained aesthetic discourses which do not make reference to structures existing outside the institution.<sup>15</sup>

*IMAGE con TEXT* attempts to reintroduce elements of ideological and political discourse to articulate some of the structures which determine the placement and function of avant-garde audio-visual practices at this time, producing an understanding of the processes by which films are financed and distributed. Posing a specific formulation of the present crisis in representation that attempts to break through the limits of contextual containment.

#### Components of 'IMAGE con TEXT'

A set of slides is used four times in the course of the presentation, initially alone and then in conjunction with a number of different 'voices over' which produce differentiation between a series of layers of history, modes of discourse.

Image sequence (14 late 19th Century photographic plates) combined with:

- 1) Ambient Sound.
- 2) Imaginary history specific to a fictionalised first person enunciated by a foreign female voice.<sup>16</sup>

14 Ian Connell, 'Ideology/Discourse/Institution', *Screen* vol 19 no 3, Autumn 1978, p 132.

15 Exemplification of this approach, if it is needed, and the discourses which support it can be found in the complex ideological negotiations performed in Paul Sharits' 'attempt to guide students into truly filmic discourses' (sic) in 'A Cinematics Model for Film Studies in Higher Education', *Film Culture* no 65/66.

16 This relates to Leggett's *Erota/Afini*, a work (in both book and film form) on the circulation, reinterpretation and narrative interrelation of 'family snaps' as found photographs.

*The departure came as rapidly as the fading of my memory in the years that have intervened — fortunately, I often think, since the loss of my dear friend a little while later . . .*



- 3) Sociological/economic — plates used as illustration to a history  
*The common lands of England are subject to common rights including the free access to all commons, the right to graze animals over the herbage, the right to gather wood (estovers), the right to dig turf for fuel or housing roofing (turbary) . . .*

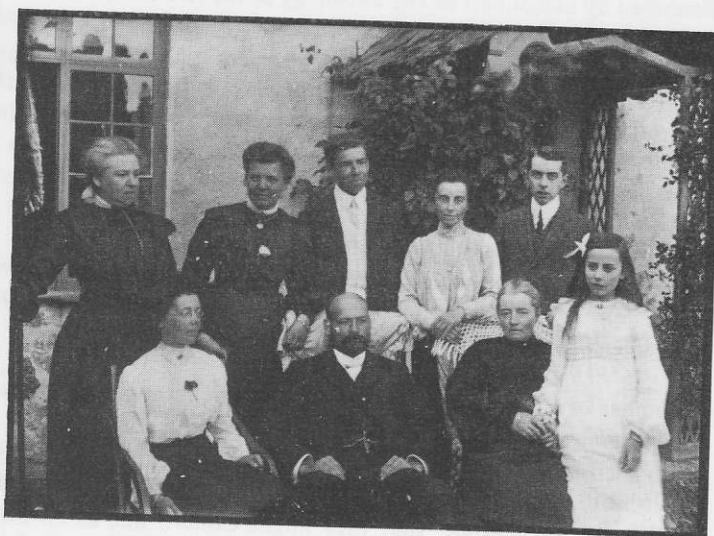


- 4) Aesthetic/technical  
*Light sensitive silver salts in responding photochemically to the focused light and then the action of a developer these salts form the image which, approximately 70 years later,*

*has been rendered readable through a process of duplication, reversing, in effect, the tonal order of the negative ...*



This last 'voice over' is the recorded voice of the lecturer which both integrates these texts to the bulk of the presentation and privileges this discourse which is mainly aesthetic/technical but also includes the entry of political and historical analysis:



*The institution of the Christian family as a basic social unit within society created the demand for representational evidence of this practice as proof of its cohesion and ascendancy.*

The successive shifts of verbal meaning over the images are inscribed in social temporality (history as an order of discourse),



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- 17 cf Nash and Neale, 'Film: History/Production/Memory', *Screen* vol 15 no 2, Summer, Winter 1977/78 vol 18 no 4.
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- 18 Eduardo Sanguinetti, 'The Sociology of the Avant-Garde', *Sociology of Literature and Drama*, Tom Burns (ed), Penguin Books, 1973.
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- 19 Barthes, 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', *Screen Summer* 1974 vol 15 no 2.
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and the process of the verbal production of meaning on polysemic visual material is problematised by offering the elements and traces without a full exposition by a controlling discourse to locate and relocate them and to construct a series of continuities. This means that the spectator is placed in a position of thinking about both the presences and the absences of the text in relation to a set of histories, discourses.<sup>17</sup> This goes some way towards producing the socially constructed and historically located function of meaning, and specifying the production relations of that meaning for an audience.

A number of films are interspersed — two sections from *Sheepman* (*Film Lane* and *Sheepwoman*) and *Pure Vanity* (an 8mm synch sound film within the same room over a period of 6 months), adopting a spoken notebook form, without providing a direct reading or explanation. They are merely placed in a network of oblique relations with other material — the image sequences described above and documentation including slide of 1) the South West Arts Distribution Agreement (outlining the terms of copyright, conditions of exhibition etc), 2) the Film-maker's Statement in *A Perspective on English Avant-Garde Film*, an Arts Council exhibition catalogue and 3) the London Film-makers Co-op Workshop description.

The function of such a combination of disparate materials is described by Sanguinetti in *The Sociology of the Avant-Garde* as

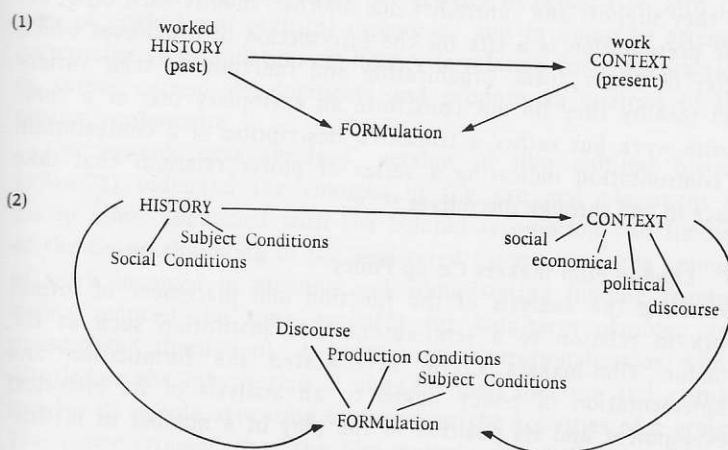
*the creation of an unbridgeable distance between the work and the spectator and hence that kind of practical opening up of the work in ideological terms which alone can overcome the limitations of contemplation.*<sup>18</sup>

and Barthes

*there is indeed an ideal meaning . . . but there is no final meaning, nothing but a series of segmentations each of which possesses a sufficient demonstrative power.*<sup>19</sup>

A number of slides of a diagram are shown at intervals throughout the programme, parts are added and it is gradually built up as areas factors and categories become relevant to the trajectory of the lecture. These diagrams are not utilised in terms of the degree of 'theoretical rectitude' that they might exhibit, but as an introduction of a number of determinant factors and a 'working' model for their relation.

The utilisation of diverse modes of discourse and incorporation of (traditionally) disparate material in a relatively uncentred textual system challenges their separation, ideologically produced




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20 *IMAGE con TEXT*

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21 McCall and Tyndall, 'Sixteen Working Statements', *Millenium* vol 1 no 2, Spring/Summer 1978.

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in institutional discourses. The conjunction of economic, social and aesthetic discourses with material on their conditions of production and reception displaces attention from the artifacts that have been produced, as Leggett suggests in the introduction to the presentation,

*these are simply the residue from a range of activities — it is more about the conditions which have perhaps been involved in giving them the form they adopt. So I'm not really concerned with discussing their peculiarities, their style, their minimalism, their formalism . . . or any of those things which could be used to describe their uniqueness or originality or any description which would seek to separate them, to distinguish them . . . the emphasis will be rather the opposite — to examine various activities and their relationships to the formulative process . . .*<sup>20</sup>

A strategy which stresses these elements rather than formal aspects draws the meaning of the films away from their previous cultural location providing a new context for their reception. This can be seen as an attempt to oppose the ideology of 'art' cinema which contains and incorporates formal experimentation relative easily.

*Self-reflexivity has become fetishised in foregrounding only the material and creative process by which the film is made, while ignoring (and therefore mystifying) the cultural and economic context of the films production and exhibition.*<sup>21</sup>

- 22 cf Foucault, I.  
*Pierre Riviere* ...  
Penguin Books,  
1978.

- 23 Reprinted in  
*Independent Film  
Workshops in  
Britain 1979*, Rod  
Stoneman (ed).

A whole web of relations is woven between the text and context — they support and contradict one another, modify each other ... The presentation is a site for the intersection of discourses which differ in origin, form, organisation and function. In their variety and totality they do not constitute an exemplary text or a composite work but rather a truncated description of a contestation, a confrontation indicating a series of power relations that take place in and through discourses.<sup>22</sup>

#### IV London Film-makers Co-op Policy

Extending the analysis of the function and placement of formal work in relation to a semi-autonomous institution such as the London Film-makers Co-op necessitated the formulation and implementation of policy linked to an analysis of its historical development and its position in the play of a number of institutional and cultural forces at the moment.

The employment of paid staff in the workshop has made the film-making equipment more easily available. However, widening the access and the scope of the facilities to people with less clearly defined projects has led to a weakening of the original coherence of the co-op as a 'tendency workshop' involving a number of film-makers working within broadly similar parameters. In the past it can be argued that it was this cohesiveness which enabled (a tendency within) avant-garde work to make an effective intervention in independent film culture and in the institutions of fine art.

Some of the problems associated with the reception and mediation of the Co-op's work are indicated by Annabel Nicolson in her introduction to programmes of 'New British Avant-Garde Cinema' for the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1978.

*Critical attention to independent film-making has resulted in the singling out of certain film-makers by institutions, including funding bodies, anxious to present independent film-making in terms of individual achievements. History tends to ignore the ways in which ideas develop and focus on the events or forms, in this case films, in which these ideas are manifest. The structure of the Co-op is awkward for history to grasp and the film-makers' work to evolve a radical context should be afforded proper recognition as fundamental to the development of independent film-making.*

At the Co-op AGM in October 1978, Mike Leggett presented a paper, the main lines of which are indicated in its extensive title: 'A Discussion Paper wishing to Raise on a Pragmatic Level the Problems of Screenings, Venues and Contexts; and on a Theoretical Level, the Issues of Functions, Ideologies and Institutionalisation.'<sup>23</sup> The paper re-examined the notion of a co-operative in terms of the

relation of film-makers to each other as individual agents of production 'wishing to extend the activity of production into the area of critical and political discourse,' and in doing so attempt to mobilise (a formulation of) history in relation to Co-op practice, to survey current developments and propose an analysis of the present conjuncture.

The 'specific and abridged' version of film cultural history (1966-78) indicated the changes in the use and placement of Co-op films, connected with the belated recognition and funding of the Co-op (founding of the Registered Company — the amount of work involved in meeting and administering funding requirements reduced the time available for long-term planning and broad-based discussion). A process of institutionalisation which also led to the substitution of films for their function and a small number of people appearing to represent the activities of a group. The paper stressed that the film-maker's responsibilities do not end with the production of a print for distribution and notes for a catalogue — this process merely allows new product to be incorporated into old relations, models.

Policy needs to be formulated in relation to clear notions of the function of the work, its audience and the role various discourses play in its reception<sup>24</sup> and include an articulation and negotiation of the problems of funding — the Co-op becoming merely a technical facility with a passive cultural function and an unthought relation (dependency) with state institutions.

In the long term further work will have to be undertaken on distribution and exhibition strategies, exhibition support for Regional Film Theatres and Film Societies, and the possibility of intervention in the Fourth Channel as well as further higher and adult education.

The presentation at the AGM led to the formation of a Working Party which met several times during the following year and produced a number of papers and proposals around the extension of control over post-production practices and contextualisation. They indicated the need for a Co-op magazine to provide information and critical/theoretical material on Co-op film-makers and to generate documentation for an eventual new Catalogue which could include general articles on the background, history and criticism and articles on specific areas of work.

It was argued that the Co-op's constitutional policy of non-promotion should not impede it from promoting and contextualising areas of work (and not specific films) — this would help to breakdown, rather than enforce, the existing selectivity which privileges the small minority of films/makers which enter public discourse. 'There is an inherent weakness in non-promotion which eliminates persuasion and taste-forming which are open to competitors' as Malcolm Le Grice wrote.<sup>25</sup>

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24 Peter Uwe Hohen-dahl, 'Introduction to Reception Aesthetics', *New German Critique* no 10, Winter 1977 is a particularly useful introduction to the problems of theorising this area.

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25 'Some thoughts on Recent Underground Film' *Afterimage* no 4, Autumn 1972.

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The working party also produced a set of guidelines on exhibition for both film-makers and Screening organisers, formalising aspects of Co-op practice on presentation format, publicity, documentation and accompaniment; and a suggested model for festival programming, specifying the processes of consultation and selection for both internal organisation and external representation. These questions were debated at an Extraordinary General Meeting in October 1979, leading to the adoption of the Working Party's proposals on exhibition guidelines, festival programming and the initiation of work on the possibility of a magazine, the catalogue proposal was modified and postponed.

### Conclusion/Summary

The practices discussed in this article indicate the importance, in producing new and self-critical modes of intervention, of starting from an analysis of the traditions and history of a specific cultural practice and its relation to the structure of mediations operating in the present conjuncture. These notes have been concerned to address the function and effectivity of a specific set of texts at a certain historical point in time — how they function as an ideological practice, and the way in which their possibilities for effecting transformation should not be seen only in terms of form but also of audience relationship and social practice.

Leggett's work is taken as an example of a relevant attempt to engage with educational ideologies and the institutionalised discourse of art, important elements in a cultural system which works to perpetuate an idealist (modernist) aesthetic centred on objects and texts and to sustain a set of ideological and social conditions . . . An understanding of this process is necessary to the project of reworking and extending the role of avant-garde, and independent film generally, in terms of an oppositional negotiation of its ideological and institutional placement and function.

### Mike Leggett Filmography

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 1963 | <i>The Lark</i>   |
| 1963 | <i>From A Sleep</i>   |
| 1966 | <i>Crash</i>  |
| 1966 | <i>Strobe</i>   |
| 1970 | <i>Unword</i> 50 min (This, and the following films are available from the London Film-Makers Co-operative, 42 Gloucester Avenue, London NW1) |
| 1970 | <i>Sheet</i> 21 min (with Ian Breakwell)  |
| 1971 | <i>Shepherds Bush</i> 15 min  |
| 1972 | <i>One</i> 20 min   |
| 1972 | <i>w Hole</i> 8 min   |
| 1972 | <i>Tender Kisses</i> 15 min   |
| 1972 | <i>Erota/Afini</i> 25 min   |

1970-76 *Sheepman & the Sheared* 135 min

- 1 *Sheep* 3 min
- 2 *Sheepman* 10 min
- 3 *Window* 45 min
- 4 *Film Lane* 18 min
- 5 *Farm* 25 min
- 6 *Blue Plus Green Plus Red* 15 min
- 7 *Sheepwoman* 16 min

**Video-work** (available from London Video Arts, 12/13 Little Newport St, London WC2.)

- 1973 *The Heart Cycle* 25 min
- 1973 *Porter Pack* 25 min
- 1974 *Waiting Room* 15 min
- 1975 *Eighteen Months Outside the Grounds of Obscenity and Libel* (Installation) 60 min
- 1979 *IMAGE con TEXT*

#### Books and Articles

- 1973 *Erota/Afini* Beau Geste Press, Devon.
- 1974 *Wayward Action*, Beau Geste Press, pamphlet documenting intervention against Westward Television.
- 1976 'Considerations on the Subject of Interference', *Studio International*, May/June 1976.

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# SCREEN

Winter 1979/80 Volume 20 Numbers 3/4  
Published by the Society for Education in Film and  
Television

	Editorial	7
	STUART HOOD: Brecht on Radio	16
	BERTOLT BRECHT: Radio as a Means of Communi- cation, a talk on the function of radio	24
Independent Cinema	GEOFFREY NOWELL-SMITH: 'Radio On'	29
	ROD STONEMAN: Film-related practice and the Avant-Garde	40
	MALCOLM LE GRICE: Towards Temporal Economy	58
Feminism and Cinema	PAM COOK: Star Signs	80
	LESLEY STERN: Feminism and Cinema—Exchanges	89
Television	PAUL KERR: Edinburgh Television Festival 1979	107
	JOHN WYVER: The Debate on TV4	111
Irish Film History and Culture	KEVIN ROCKETT: Irish Cinema—notes on some nationalist fictions	115
	RICHARD KEARNEY: Joyce on Language, Women and Politics	124
Copyright	PAUL HIRST, ELIZABETH KINGDOM: On Edelman's 'Ownership of the Image'	135
	VINCENT PORTER: Film Copyright and Edelman's Theory of Law	141
Letters	Letters from the Film Work Group, P Adams Sitney, Janet Bergstrom and Constance Penley	149

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