

THEORY AND DEFINITION OF STRUCTURAL/ MATERIALIST FILM

Part one of Peter Gidal's introductory essay to the Structural Film Anthology, Published by the BFi in 1976.

Structural/ Materialist film attempts to be non-illusionist. The process of the film's making deals with devices that result in demystification or attempted demystification of the film process. But by 'deals with' I do not mean 'represents'. In other words, such films do not document various film procedures, which would place them in the same category as films which transparently document a narrative, a set of actions, etc. Documentation, through usage of the film medium as transparent, invisible, is exactly the same when the object being documented is some 'real event', some film procedure', some 'story', etc. An avant-garde film defined by its development towards increased materialism and materialist function does not represent, or document, anything. The film produces certain relations between segments, between what the camera is aimed at and the way that 'image' is presented. The dialectic of the film is established in that space of tension between materialist flatness, grain, light, movement, and the supposed reality that is represented. Consequently a continual attempt to destroy the illusion is necessary. In Structural/ Materialist film, the in/film (not in/frame) and film/viewer material relations, and the relations of the film's structure, are primary to any representational content. The structuring aspects and the attempt to decipher the structure and anticipate/ recorrect it, to clarify and analyse the production-process of the specific image at any specific moment, are the root concern of Structural/ Materialist film. The specific construct of each specific film is not the relevant point; one must beware not to let the construct, the shape, take the place of the 'story' in narrative film. Then one would merely be substituting one hierarchy for another within the same system, a formalism for what is traditionally called content. This is an absolutely crucial point.'

Devices

Through usage of specific filmic devices such as repetition within duration one is forced to attempt to decipher both the film's material and the film's construct, and to decipher the precise transformations that each co/incide/nce of cinematic techniques produces. The attempt is primary to any specific shape, otherwise the discovery of shape (fetishising shape or system) may become the theme, in fact, the narrative of the film. This is a crucial distinction for a (dialectically) materialist definition of structural film. That is why Structural/ Materialist film in fact demands an orientation of definition completely in opposition to the generally used vague notions concerning 'Structural Film'.

Production

Each film is a record (not a representation, not a reproduction) of its own making. Production of relations (shot to shot, shot to image, grain to image, image dissolution to grain, etc.) is a basic function which is in direct opposition to reproduction of relations. Elsewhere in this essay I shall try to elucidate further this problematic of production versus reproduction. Suffice it to say here that it is the core of meaning which differentiates illusionist from anti-illusionist film. When one states that each film is a record of its own making, this refers to shooting, editing, printing stages, or separations of these, dealt with specifically. Such film mitigates against dominant (narrative) cinema. Thus viewing such a film is at once viewing a film and viewing the 'coming into presence' of the film, i.e. the system of consciousness that produces the work, that is produced by and in it.

Represented 'Content'

There is this representational 'reality' one is aiming the camera at. This remains true even if for example the representational content is pared down to the filmstrip itself being pulled through the printer. In fact this isn't necessarily a paring down at all. The Structural/ Materialist film must minimise the content in its overpowering, imagistically seductive sense, in an attempt to get through this miasmatic area of 'experience' and proceed with film as film. Devices such as loops or seeming loops, as well as a whole series of technical possibilities, can, carefully constructed to operate in the correct manner, serve to veer the point of contact with the film past internal content. The content thus serves as a function upon which, time and time again, a film-maker works to bring forth the filmic event. [2]

The usage of the word content so far has been within the common usage, i.e. representational content. In fact, the real content is the form, form become content. Form is meant as formal operation, not as composition. Also, form must be distinguished from style, otherwise it serves merely in its reactionary sense to mean formalism, such as: this formal usage (e.g. Welles) versus that (e.g. Sternberg).

Film as material

The assertion of film as material is, in fact, predicated upon representation, in as much as 'pure' empty acetate running through the projector gate without image (for example) merely sets off another level of abstract (or non-abstract) associations. Those associations, when instigated by such a device, are no more materialist or nonillusionist than any other associations. Thus the film event is by no means, through such a usage, necessarily demystified. 'Empty screen' is no less signficatory than 'carefree happy smile'. [3] There are myriad possibilities for co/optation and integration of filmic procedures into the repertoire of meaning.

The Viewer

The mental activation of the viewer is necessary for the procedure of the film's existence. Each film is not only structural but also structuring. This is extremely important as each moment of film reality is not an atomistic, separate entity but rather a moment in a relativistic generative system in which one can't simply break down the experience into elements. The viewer is forming an equal and possibly more or less opposite 'film' in her/his head, constantly anticipating, correcting, re-correcting - constantly intervening in the arena of confrontation with the given reality, i.e. the isolated chosen area of each film's work, of each film's production.

Dominant cinema

In dominant cinema, a film sets up characters (however superficially deep their melodramas) and through identification and various reversals, climaxes, complications (usually in the same order) one aligns oneself unconsciously with one or more characters. These internal connections between viewer and viewed are based on systems of identification which demand primarily a passive audience, a passive viewer, one who is involved in the meaning that word has taken on within film-journalese, i.e. to be not involved, to get swept along through persuasive emotive devices employed by the film director. This system of cinematic functioning categorically rules out any dialectic. It is a cinematic functioning, it should be added, analogous on the part of the film director to that of the viewer, not to mention the producer, who is not a producer, who has no little investment in the staking out of the economics of such repression. What some of the more self-defined 'left-wing' directors would rationalise in terms of dialectic are merely cover-ups for identification, selling the same old wares, vi: Antonioni and the much less talented Bertolucci, Pasolini, Losey, not to mention committed right-wing directors. Thus, if a character is somewhat more complex, or if the acting is of a higher order, or if the lighting cameraman does most of the work, then the director rationalises the work which would seem to imply that he is as taken in by the phantasy as the viewer. Whether he is or not (there are few she's in such a position) is in fact irrelevant. The ideological position is the same.

Dialectic

There is a distinct difference between what can be termed the ambiguousness of an identification process [4] and a dialectic functioning. Ambiguousness posits each individual viewer (or reader, listener, etc.) as subject: the subject, that is, who forms the

interpretation. One becomes posited, formed, constituted, in fact, as the subject of the self-expression and self-representation through the mediation of a repressive ideological structure. That ideological structure is in this case narrative cinema, part of which is the process of identification. Ambiguity aligns itself as a concept (and therefore as a reality) with the concept of freedom and individualism. The two latter concepts are extremely rigidified in late capitalism. The individual also thus becomes posited as static, as essence, as ideal (or referring to the possibility of such). The individual becomes posited as unitary, 'free' view, centred in deep perspective space away from the screen, and invisibly solidified, ever-present. Our whole formation towards, and in, filmic enterprises, is dominated by such ideological strangleholds.

Identification

The commercial cinema could not do without the mechanism of identification.' It is the cinema of consumption, in which the viewer is of necessity not a producer, [6] of ideas, of knowledge. Capitalist consumption reifies not only the structures of the economic base but also the constructs of abstraction. Concepts, then, do not produce concepts; they become, instead, ensconced as static 'ideas' which function to maintain the ideological class war and its invisibility, the state apparatus in all its fields.

The mechanism of identification demands a passive audience, a passive mental posture in the face of a life un-lived, a series of representations, a phantasy identified with for the sake of 90 minutes' illusion. And that 'phantasy' is often not even the (insipid) utopian romance of what should be' (Marcuse's justification for Goethe's poems) nor the so-called 'intervention' in bourgeois morality that at moments may be approached in de Sade, La Fontaine, Sacher-Masoch (never without intensely counterproductive repressions and paranoiac violence stimulating and appeasing the bourgeois' tastes and tolerances).

Identification is inseparable from the procedures of narrative, though not totally covered by it. The problematic centres on the question as to whether narrative is inherently authoritarian, manipulatory and mystificatory, or not. The fact that it requires identificatory procedures and a lack of distancing to function, and the fact that its only possible functioning is at an illusionistic level, indicates that the problematic has a clear resolution. In that sense, it is more of a problem than a problematic. The ramifications of the crucial question are very limited. Narrative is an illusionistic procedure, manipulatory, mystificatory, repressive. The repression is that of space, the distance between the viewer and the object, a repression of real space in favour of the illusionist space. The repression is, equally importantly, of the in-film spaces, those perfectly constructed continuities. The repression is also that of time. The implied lengths of time suffer compressions formed by

certain technical devices which operate in a codified manner, under specific laws, to repress (material) film time.

Narrative and deconstruction

A further point on narrative: while the deconstruction of narrative as an academic exercise is not of vital import, it would be in any case a useful function towards expropriating the ownership of the codes of narrativity. Which means that the meanings formed by certain filmic operations could be analysed and no more be the privileged possession of the owners of the means of production; in this case, the means of production of meaning in film. Thus deconstruction exercises, in their limited way, are not irrelevant as sociological insight into certain filmic operations. Deconstruction exercises, maintained filmically (i.e. on film, in film) are direct translations from the written into film, and are thus filmically reactionary, though illustrative of certain ideas about film. The re-translation back into language (words) would seem to negate the necessity of narrative-deconstruction being undertaken on, or in, film, rather than in writing. This has now dawned, perhaps, on the overzealous graduates who wish to make statements about certain usages of narrative.

Apart from work in deconstruction, there is also that filmwork which is interpreted as deconstruction, works which have as their basic project an overhauling (not a criticising and not a smashing) of narrative, such as the pseudo-narratives of Robbe-Grillet's appalling films, or Straub's post- (and sometimes pre-) Brechtian exercises in distanciation and reflection. (Even here the Brecht of the theatre is mistaken for the Brechtian theoriser.) [7] Other examples are Dreyer's purist set pieces of dramatics, straightforward identificatory narratives, the identification merely shifted from the psychological/emotional to the psychological/rationalistic. The identification into the narrative is through the thoughts, the ideas about the actions, the decisions, the ratio, instead of the melodramatic unthought motivations of characters propelled by unthought 'fear', 'desire', etc. as in most other films. A study is urgently needed on the theme of narrative versus non-narrative form and on the inadequacy of the mechanistic deconstruction approach which ends up illustrating rather than being, which ends up static, time denying, posited as exemplary rather than relative, contradictory, motored into filmic, durational transformation through dialectic procedures.

Art movements

Two art movements had their special effects on the current avant garde, Structural/ Materialist film, and on those structural films which are working in that direction. The art movements were: the aesthetics of Abstract- Expressionism (though not necessarily the

imagist results) and Minimalism (to include such work as Stella's). [8] A major problem erupts here: that of making visible the procedure, presenting such as opposed to using it. Throughout this essay, virtually every problem centres on the opposition between usage and presentation, incorporating versus foregrounding, etc. There exists also the problem of the 'sensitive' artist, ever-present in the final object, which can be one end the means to which is an art which may record its own making. But the other end, and the division must be carefully analysed and researched with each case in question, is that of an art which is not an imagist creation, a decorative object (narrative or otherwise) separated from its means of production without a trace left. If the final work magically represses the procedures which in fact are there in the making, then that work is not a materialist work. This is a crucial point as to usage versus presentation. And in each work many factors are operating which produce either an over-determination of the usage (i.e. repression) of the procedures, or an over-determination of the presentedness of the procedures.

Jacques Derrida has clarified what in fact is at stake in a work, in the procedure of constituting a work. His definition of differance (with an 'a') is useful precisely because it clarifies an aspect of work which previously was latent but not brought to speech, not adequately theorised, and which therefore always fell back into the ideology of illusionism and unseen subject (the artist).

We shall designate by the term differance the movement by which language or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes historically constituted as a fabric of differences ... Differance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each element that is said to be 'present', appearing on the stage of presence, is related to something other than itself but retains the mark of a past element and already lets itself be hollowed out by the mark of its relation to a future element. This trace relates no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and it constitutes what is called the present by this very relation to what it is not, to what it absolutely is not; that is, not even to a past or a future considered as a modified present... We ordinarily say that a sign is put in place of the thing itself, the present thing - 'thing' holding here for the sense as well as the referent. Signs represent the present in its absence; they take the place of the present. When we cannot take hold of or show the thing, let us say the present, the being present, when the present does not present itself, then we signify, we go through the detour of signs. (J. Derrida, in *Speech and Phenomena*, 'Differance')

The aesthetics of Abstract-Expressionism in fact could produce an imagist object which never separated itself from individualist psychological origins, whereas the 'same' aesthetic base could function in certain works as production itself presented, distanced. Such presentation of production functions in certain drawings of targets by Jasper Johns

(for example), distancing the object as object, as created text, towards which the various marks added to each other, negating, erasing, produce further elaborations towards an as yet unfulfilled total surface. [9] (Total is used in the sense of at some point coming to a stop.) The essential locus is again the question of psychological orientation, that is, identification, whether into the 'fantastic' or the 'real' or the 'surreal', in opposition to stated notions of distancing. But it must be clarified that the distancing is not from some wholly elaborated fantastic, real or surreal, from which a distance is created. Rather, the text itself is elaborated and constituted in such a way that the whole work process of reading the marks necessitates a reading of differences and a dialecticisation of the material procedures which produce the marking one is confronted with. The subject of the work is not the invisible artist symbolically inferred through the work's presence, but rather the whole foregrounded fabric of the complex system of markings itself.

What Frank Stella may have verbalised correctly (see footnote 8) did not prevent his work from becoming exactly the Abstract-Expressionist problem, the whole conglomeration of feelings, associations, seductions, representations which an imagist work demands no matter how 'process'-oriented the production process itself was. Similarly the process of making a Welles or Fassbinder film is not in an adequate way the product. This is the root of the whole problem I am trying to get at. Some of Stella's early works could escape this Abstract-Expressionist route, just as many of Johns' and Giacometti's works fail to avoid or solve that problem. Process as general definition is in fact vacuous. This vacuous definition is nevertheless filled, ideologically rigidified, in such a way that few works escape through the gap left, and those works are a conjuncture (happenstance or not) of a whole range of incidents and factors, co/incide/nces which enable this escape from the co/opting 'process' definition (and concreteness). This 'escape' is not a displacement (which would therefore create a misunderstanding, or a theoretical gap, elsewhere) or a suppression, but an adequate solution of questions correctly posed in terms of materialist practice and theoretical embodiment.

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That does not mean the artist consciously verbalised the degrees and factors which had significance in the creation of the object that finds its way out, escaping the recuperative pseudo-freedom of the epithet 'process'. Stella's good intentions count for little, and vice versa for Klee's often naturalistic, representational, evolutionist notions, radically countermanded by those works which form a conjuncture of structural dissociation, pared down 'simplicity' in terms of imagery and internal relations, formalised colour schemes and other factors, to realise (produce) works which function in a non-naturalised, textual

presentedness. Non-naturalisation means specifically that the works don't fit into the category of naturalness, whether this naturalness refers to the image-content (i.e. naturalness of the representation) or to what is natural for painting, what is allowable, what does not necessitate a reading but rather falls blindly into parameters of meaning consciously or unconsciously predefined.

A materialist reading at one with the inscription of the work (which is the work) is enabled or forced; Klee's usage, in these cases, of the virtually unloaded or nearly empty signifier (Foucault cites them as 'completely empty signifiers') is possibly the dominant factor in the adequate presentation of materialist art practice in works such as *Alter Kiang*, *Doppezeit*, etc.' Signifiers approaching emptiness means merely (!) that the image taken does not have a ready associative analogue, is not a given symbol or metaphor or allegory; that which is signified by the signifier, that which is conjured up by the image given, is something formed by past connections but at a very low key, not a determining or over-determining presence, merely a not highly charged moment of meaning. Thus, although this example is oversimplified, the edge of a leaf seen for a moment only, or only seen (in a film, for instance) slightly related to other equally insignificant signifiers (within a context which allows them to operate as insignificant), does not necessarily lead to associations stronger than 'leaf' or 'another leaf quite similar' or a non-emotional grasp of 'room, leaf' without existential angst, doubt, a sense of lonely fragility, etc. And that low-level signifier in momentary interplay with other low-level signifiers foregrounds a possibly materialist play of differences which don't have an overriding hierarchy of meaning, which don't determine the ideological reading, which don't lead into heavy associative symbolic realms. The actual relations between images, the handling, the appearance, the 'how it is', etc., takes precedence over any of the 'associative', or 'internal' meanings. Thus is presented the arbitrariness of meaning imbibed in, for example, such an image-moment of a leaf. The unnaturalness, ungivenness, of any possible meaning is posited. Such practice thereby counters precisely the ideological usages which are dominant; the usages which give meaning to images, things, signs, etc., meanings which are then posited as natural, as inherent. The whole idealist system is opposed by a materialist practice of the production of meaning, of the arbitrariness of the signifier. (Meaning is made.) And for this concept, this thought, the semiotic notions of signifier/signified are of tremendous import.

Reading duration

In film, duration as material piece of time is the basic unit.

Does a painting come into existence all at once? No, it's built up piece by piece, not

different from a house. When a point becomes movement and line, it takes up time. Similarly, when a line pulls itself out into a plane. And the same when a flat plane becomes a three dimensional enclosure. And the viewer, does he (she) respond to the work as a whole? Often yes, unfortunately.

Paul Klee, Schöpferische Konfession

I am not positing direct cause and effect, or even direct analogue, between painting and film. Similarly, the effect, more specifically, of Abstract- Expressionism and Minimalism on Structural/ Materialist film is not direct.

The problematic of reading duration when viewing a painting was important to Klee and others. Actual duration can only exist in film, in terms of the approximation towards a 1:1 relation between work and viewer (production time and 'reading' time). Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*, Eisenstein's *Strike*, Lumière's films, form a core of basic work in this field of research, the anti-illusionist project. As to Structural music, Bach's preludes and fugues relate strongly to some of the work of Terry Riley, Steve Reich (*Stick Piece*), etc. More specific to film: more often than not, 'real' time is utilised in the Structural/ Materialist film, in clearly defined segments or in the film as a whole, thus breaking from illusionistic time (substructured in codes of narrativity). The closing of the gap in space between viewer and viewed, and between the representation in one shot and another, is a basic repressive illusionist device. The implication of an unseen splice to integrate two shots also elides the function of editing, the function of producing, from material segments, a new complex relation. Instead, there is a seeming natural flow established, which suppresses all procedures of the editing stages. The concept of integration rather than disruption is predicated on a repression of the material relations specific to the film process, and this of course is not unconnected with the violence done to (eradicate) the adequate presentation of material relations in the spheres of ideology, the image, plastic representation, narrative mimesis, etc. Attempted in Structural/ Materialist film is a non-hierarchical, cool, separate unfolding of a perceptual activity. That perceptual activity is not to be understood as relegating the primary function to the individual perceiver, who of course is embedded in ideological structures/strictures. The problematics of perception as a concept have yet to be satisfactorily delineated. Still, film is a perceptual activity (amongst other things) and without perception and the relations attendant upon that process there is no film practice (or in any case not one that is non-idealistic, not one that is not mechanistically materialist).

Distance

Through the attempted non-hierarchical, cool, separate unfolding a distance- (ing) is sought. This distance reinforces (rather than denies) the dialectic interaction of viewer with each film moment, which is necessary if it is not to pass into passiveness and needlessness. This interaction on the physical level and on the level of critical praxis is obvious. The real time element demands such a consciousness and will. I can here only hint at the deeper problematic within which the 'real time' I : i relation between viewer and viewed is located.

Aspects of time

(1) 'Real time', that is, time present as it is for the film-maker, denoted not connoted, at the stage of shooting, editing, printing, projecting, and interrelations of these. Commonly, 'real time' is presented in single takes or film segments utilised for their actual duration (often after many viewings they separate themselves as such). (2) There is illusionistic time, time made to seem what it is not, such as in conventional and (it must be said) in much Eisensteinian editing. E.g., cut from 10.15 p.m. London interior- the lovers kiss to midnight near the lake, husband and wife murder each other (long shot), either implying a linear thread of events with time compressed, or a simultaneity with time compressed. (3) The third 'example' is that of post-Newtonian, Einsteinian time. There is here no absolute value other than that of the interaction of film moment and viewer. This relativistic time may but does not necessarily connect with 'real time'. The notion of 'real time' on its own fails to take account precisely of this relativistic nature of time, the practice of film-making as it correlates to the theoretical embodied in it. (How it is how it is what it is.) Much formulation taking place at the moment deals with retrograde work but this may be a step towards being equipped to deal adequately with Structural/ Materialist film. Adequate work is indeed necessary in film-making and writing 'on' film. A semiotics that is right-wing is not the only one I can envisage, though little else is at the moment forthcoming. One can cite, in support of the above assertion, the lamentably reactionary symbolic interpretation by Roland Barthes of a series of Eisenstein stills.* Such a position needs to be combatted, but so too does Foucault's superb Marxist/Althusserian interpretation of, for example, Magritte's retrograde picture-puzzle-gimmicks. What we are stuck with is often advanced theoretical formulation, critically adapted to work which does not warrant it. This results in a reading into the work. For such a critical operation, the most reactionary work will suffice because, after all, one can project one's 'personal' wishful thinking into virtually any film. Partaking of the primal scene and 'work on the signifier' seem to be the dominant current malpractices.

Left to itself, a spontaneous (technical) practice produces only the 'theory' it needs as a means to produce the ends assigned to it; this 'theory' is never more than the reflection of this end, uncriticized, unknown, in its means of realization; that is, it is a by-product of the

reflection of the technical practice's end on its means. A 'theory' which does not question the end whose by-product it is remains a prisoner of this end and of the realities which have imposed it as an end. Examples of this are many of the branches of psychology, of sociology, and of Politics, of Economics, of Art, etc

Louis Althusser, For Marx

We have, among English advanced film-makers, work which utilises traditional, transparent documentary film-making in an unthought manner, under the guise of Structural/ Materialist operation. The use, for example, of black leader cut into a film to be the image of the time when the camera motor was not running is a mystification of the most dangerous sort. That mystification can devise routes back to the apparent point of departure. One then ends up, through this repressive re-routing, at a stage prior to that of the anti-illusionist project. In fact, these mis-routings can lead further back, to the original point of aggression, the stimulus to one's film practice in the first place, i.e. the 'straight' documentary against which the anti-illusionist film is working. In this example, black leader posits a direct representation of time, which in fact it is not. It posits a direct representation of an action, 'camera motor turned off', which it is not. Thus it is a representation which does not present itself. It posits itself as an image of something other than itself, which in fact it is not. It posits a gap between two 'realities', i.e. the preceding shot and the following shot, thus attempting to annihilate its presence (thus representing and repressing at the same time). Unquestioned in the above operation is the signifying area as well; no investigation, let alone intervention, is undertaken apropos that area. Thus the use of black leader as posited in my example instantiates an illusionist operation which is then covered, or masked.

The demarcations must be drawn all the more strictly when dealing with such work precisely because the rearguard revision it performs is seemingly not obvious. That some films do not in any way posit such rearguard work, though their makers cannot fully articulate their filmic method and practice, is in no way a contradiction in terms. The question of (artistic) intention comes up here, and whether or not that intention can be said to exist precisely by its presence in the work. More often than not, the nonverbalisation of intention is not a sign of the translatability of the specific film practice into words, but rather a mere absence of correct verbalisation, which does not deny in those cases the 'absolute' translatability into words of intention. In some few cases, indeed, this is not the case. The root of this question is the mechanistic, simplistic notion that without speech there is no production. It is obvious, nevertheless, that those intentions which are articulated are often not what is in fact operating as inscription in (and of) the work. It is the work one deals with; slight shifts in words, like slight shifts in filmwork

operations, can radically alter the position and meaning. These slight shifts, which are in fact major shifts, exist in that untranslatability between the maker's intention as thought in speech, the maker's intention as unthought in speech though capable of being verbalised, the maker's intention as unthought at all, the maker's intention as untranslatable into speech, though thought ('I know what I want to do, i.e. in advance and having gone through decision-making processes, but I don't know why, i.e. can't say why') etc.

Anglo/American Structural and Structural/ Materialist film has so far failed to attract any attempt at theory. Advanced mainly French - theory (not necessarily concerning film directly) is either not capable of dealing with film or posits retrograde illusionist, post-Bazinian manifestations of film. With the (at best) nearly total demise of New American Cinema, 14 mainly through its resurgent romanticism or (worst) its continued operation as pseudo-narrative investigations, there remain the few English (plus one Canadian and one Austrian) Structural/ Materialist film-makers, who are working to a great extent without the beginnings of a theoretical /historical approach. Consequently, in most cases (at best) these films open up contradictions between theory (not necessarily of film) and the practice of film-making as it embodies theory, i.e. is theoretical. That these contradictions are opened up by films which are largely 'unconsciously thought' on the part of the film-makers is another problem.

As to the theoretical practice of film theory, nothing at all seems to have been begun. The derivative material published in Screen is merely importation from at most three Paris sources; though at moments useful it is not directed correctly, is not made to interact with avant-garde film practice in this country (or any other). Operating in a vacuum as far as avant-garde cinema is concerned, it finds itself not coincidentally aligned with dominant cinema, with no production capacity of its own. British avant-garde film since 1966 has not been studied; nor the works of the European avant-garde experimental film of the late 1950s and the 1960s. Witness to this lack of knowledge is the following extract from the absurd 'dialogue' which Screen conducted with Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen (no fault of theirs):

Screen: Nevertheless, the importance of language and the way it is used in your film is very different from the kind of irrational, mystic overtones of the Anglo/Saxon avant-gardes, such as Sharits, Wieland, Frampton, and so on. I see your film as closer to a materialist conception of language such as e.g. modern French theories of writing.

Wollen: That's an absolutely false characterization of those films. For instance, Hollis Frampton's Zorns Lemma (1971) is based on mathematical transformations in relation to the alphabet.

Screen: Which again comes out of mysticism and Kabbala.

Wollen: But by that token Kabbalism is also very strong, e.g. in Robbe-Grillet. I would say Kabbalism runs very strongly through all that French thought. You can see how, for instance, Jabès and Jewish thought feeds into Derrida. There is a very strong streak of Kabbalism in Te/Quel... I see Zorns Lemma on the Straub side of the interface rather than the Brakhage side, though it does have a neoplatonist aspect concerning light.

Screen: Maybe we should talk about that some other time.

(Screen, Autumn 1974)

More unfortunately, Screen's interviewers wrote an introduction ending with the following statement: 'The interview with Peter Wollen and Laura Mulvey can be described as polemical in the sense that the ideas discussed in it as well as the film itself (Pen thesilea) may appear totally aberrant when seen in the context of British film culture at the present time.' Apart from the coy, non-normative use of the word 'aberrant', the statement unmasks the complete repression by Screen's editors of the film culture as it exists.'

Conclusion

Structural /Materialist films are at once object and procedure. Some are clearly, blatantly of a whole, others work as obvious fragments, non-beginning-non-end film. Both rely upon an aesthetic that tries to create didactic works (learning not teaching', i.e. operational productions not reproductive representations). At the same time there is attempted avoidance of empiricism, and the mystic romanticism of higher sensibility individualism. This romantic base of much American Structural film has been elucidated by P. A. Sitney. Visionary film-making is precisely the post-Blakean mire that Structural/ Materialism confronts, whether this confrontation is articulated or not. 'Unconsciously thought' processes define themselves in practice. One must go on after Warhol, not revert to a re-invigorated pre-Warholian stance; one ought to be, by now, tired of expressing the same old thing. . . 'trying to express when there is nothing to express'. To ignore the ideological function of Sitney's exegesis of a 'new romantic affirmation in recoiling against the tremendously crucial aesthetic attack that Warhol made' is precisely to be embedded in dominant ideology as located in the specific area being discussed: film. (Film Culture, Spring 1972, P. A. Sitney.)

The ideological direction of Sitney's arguments is not mentioned here as part of my

criticism, since it coincides with the ideological weight of the works he discusses and therefore he becomes in fact the most adequate spokesman for and exegete of the films he deals with, with notable exceptions. (I shall also not attempt to elucidate the dominant ideology here in specific terms.) Structural film became merely another aesthetic mode, another formalism, in fact, with a vague set of rules and self-definitions yet without important function or meaning outside its mere differentiation per se from previous modes. I see Structural/ Materialist film of course within a materialist function if it is to operate usefully. Some such works of Structural/ Materialist film are the following: Little Dog For Roger, Yes No Maybe Maybe Not (Malcolm LeGrice), Wavelength , Back and Forth , Central Region (Michael Snow), Trees in Autumn, TV, Szondi Test , Auf der Pfaueninsel (Kurt Krcn), Diagonal (William Raban), A debar , Schwechater (Peter Kubelka), Process Red , Zorns Lemma (Hollis Frampton), the problematic Erlanger Program (Roger Hammond), Deck (Gill Eatherley), Film No. 1 , A' Film , Man With a Movie Camera (David Crosswaite), Word Movie , 3 mm. section Razor in Fluxus (Paul Sharits), my own Clouds , Hall , Room Film 1973 , Green Cut Gate (Fred Drummond).

To make distinctions between works is a matter of clearly contextualising the problematic, and each work's operation within it. Each work must be brought forth to clarity from the multilayered inscriptions that it is. Using the term Structural/Materialist is dangerous as well, since it refers to Structural Film. Equal emphasis must be put on the Materialist 'half' of the term (and a dialectical materialism, not a mechanistic materialism, is necessary). The term Structural Film took as basic assumption the contexts of merely three or four works and evolved a thesis from them, works not all of more than minor importance. Perhaps the same can be said at this juncture of my definition of Structural/ Materialist film. The 'theory' was meant for more than parochial definition of these (above) works.

One creates a work. One also creates, in varying degrees, a negation of past work, of historically constituted bases for tradition. The Structural/ Materialist film and production of meaning in film is the production of film itself, in its (thought or 'unthought') theoreticalness and (thought or 'unthought') ideological intervention. To intervene crucially in film practice, the 'unthought' must be brought to knowledge, thought. The set of relations between film practice, theoretical practice, and film as theory, can then be brought forth to operate in clarity.

Notes

The concept of structure's importance, vis à vis that of representational content, led to the notion of shape taking precedence and confused the issue nearly irreparably. Slight shifts become major theoretical interventions which change the locus of meaning of the work

being produced, and the axis along which it operates in time. This is not mere obsessive Talmudic or French academic preoccupation. Althusser's concept of the absolutely essential importance of the correct usage of the word bears remembering; the correct formulation is necessary to close the gap between advanced theoretical practice and the dominance of idealist speech. (Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, London, 1970.)

2. By the word film-maker, though, I do not mean to imply that the producer (film-maker) is inserted as mythical figure, as shadow symbol of the 'real', as mirror. Anonymity is indeed a prerequisite; but a superficial anonymity brought into a false existence through such things as 'coldness' - heavy atmospheric intervention - functions precisely as the opposite of its supposed intention. Anonymity must in fact be created through transformation, dialectically posited into the filmic event itself. That is, anonymity must be the result, at a specific instance; it too must be produced rather than illustrated or obliquely 'given' in a poetical sense.
3. This is so because of: associativeness, symbolic reading, integration into the diegesis, subsumation to the dominant illusory system posited, displacement to a mere different level of phantasy-acceptance, poetic shock supportive of the primary story, etc. The signifier and the signified as arbitrary, as artifice, and as less than primary, is the area in which production of 'meaning' must take place. Meaning at this stage must be seen to clearly obtain to Structural/ Materialist reading. Yet by collaborating in the current usage of the term reading I separate myself from the bourgeois oppression of the dominance of the word while acknowledging its hegemony.
4. In the Japanese theatre, an actor holding a mask in front of his/her face, so that the audience can see the 'real' face behind, is for all that no less identificatory, no less co/optable into the narrative structure and diegetic linearity. The grasping of this example is crucial to the basis for the whole theoreticisation of the problem of narrative. So far all essays on narrative and narrative deconstruction have been mechanistic, derivative of dominant cinema's needs, in inverted form, with no break (epistemological or otherwise). The same goes for all attempts at narrative-deconstructive cinema. It is in order to point to the fact that illustration of a thesis (of deconstruction, or otherwise) in (on) film denies duration, the basic cinematic structure. Illustration mystifies realfilmic relations; the basic project is thus illusionism, not deconstruction of representational codes, the latter being recuperated as the narrative is constituted.

The latter statement should not be seen to imply naiveté on my part as to the frequent occurrence of so-called non-narrative film which in fact sets up an imagist illusionism, a set of ideological codifications equally manipulatory, undialectical, identificatory. The system

of identification into the imagist code relies heavily on the usage of the imaginary referent, that which is referred to transparently, wherein the medium is not produced as opaque. This system of identification also relies heavily on the repression of the production of the signifier-as-arbitrary, that is, as the strictly ideologically posited coherence artificially manufactured between signifier and signified. As long as these relations are not studied and made to produce work, the illusionist project is not one step further out of its miasmatic repressed state.

I must add: when stating that in identification real relations are mystified, I in no way refer to real relations in a positivist or empiricist manner.

'For objective dialectics the absolute is also to be found in the relative. The unity, the coincidence, identity, resultant force, of opposites, is conditional, temporary, transitory, and relative.' Lenin, *On Dialectics*, in *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*

'Feeling like a voyeur watching Warhol's pornographic *Couch* is precisely not to be in the position of a voyeur. It is precisely the stare (and the seeming stare of *Wavelength*) that works to counter the identificatory process, though it does not of necessity smash it. And the word subvert has become too clichéd and ambiguous to be used effectively in this context. The ineffable stare presents the medium's presence, though positing a deep space centrepiece out from the screen, across from the objects of the film, particularly in *13 Most Beautiful Women* and parts of *Chelsea Girls*.'

(London College of Printing Notes on Film, Peter Gidal, 1971.)

5. Aristotelian catharsis is inseparable from identification and the purging (whether this is a pseudo, i.e. unreal, concept or not) is inextricably bound to the latter's operations.
6. In reference to my own work, Michael Snow implies such a constant production rather than consumption. The example is apt because often what seems like (and is, in fact) an untheorised position is of the order of a theoretical supposition. Snow's words: '. . . your film (*Room Film* 1973) had to be worked at. I felt as if it were made by my father, as if it were made by a blind man. I felt that searching tentative quality, that quality of trying to see.' (Michael Snow, Sept. 1973, London.) This attempt at verbalisation, loose as it is, in fact is stating theoretically, beneath the surface, an aesthetic necessitating dialectic attempts at image arrestation, the necessity for production rather than consumption. 'Sometimes the repeating shots would be clear, sometimes one couldn't tell if it was continuous.' The constitution of the work, coming from the material relations of the work, but not mechanistically positioning (i.e. illustrating) itself tautologically, is at the base of the

meaning of Snow's statement. Similarly, what seems an aesthete's formalist delight in light in Jonas Mekas' (*Village Voice*, 10 February 1975 and 29 October 1973) and to some extent Lucy Fischer's pieces on my film are really attempts to articulate verbally a problematic of the constitution of the filmic image, opaquely through the agency of light; thus the whole problematic of image-constitution through something, a representation as a constitution rather than as a given, 'captured' transparently. This theoretically important difference is thus elucidated beneath the idealist mask which film prose in fact mostly is. Fischer is more analytical and less poetic than Mekas. I quote only the former, the quote most apt to be diversionary without meaning to be so. 'The rest of the film proceeds with an examination of a room and the way that light illuminates the objects within it.' (Lucy Fischer, *Soho Weekly News*, 16 January 1975, italics mine.)

According to Lawrence Van Gelder in the *New York Times* (17 January 1975), 'It [*Room Film 1973*] is a murky, granular journey around a room, broken by occasional incursions of light' (italics mine). The ideological concept of journey, a man's journey through a given universe, is somehow at the base of the writings on *Room Film 1973*. It is as if all film were (and I suspect this to be the case) still recuperated as some form of masked or not-so-masked documentary rather than a filmic articulation and constituting presence, a filmic production precisely in its operations on the level of the problematics of procedure and representation. That the pseudo-documentary is the unspoken gap in current film knowledge, in terms of theory, practice and theoretical practice, I have hinted at elsewhere ('*Un Cinéma Matérialiste Structural*', *L'Art Vivant*, Février 1975, pp. 16-17, as well as *Studio International*, March 1975, '5th Knokke Experimental Film Festival').

7. As to Brecht, there are some illuminating comments from his writings. 'Science isn't so free of superstition. Where knowledge doesn't suffice, faith produces itself, and that is always superstition ... our lyricists didn't lose their voice because of the book *Capital* but in the face of *Capital* itself.' 'If Realism isn't defined purely formalistically (that which in the 90's was considered Realism, in the realm of the bourgeois novel) then much can be said against techniques like montage, interior monologue, or distancing (*Verfremdung*), only not from the point of view of Realism! ... as a technical means, the interior monologue (of Joyce) was rejected; one called it formalist. I never understood the reasoning. Just because Tolstoy would have done it differently isn't a reason to reject the way Joyce does it. The objections were constructed so superficially that one got the impression that if Joyce had put the same monologue (Molly Bloom's final one) in the psychoanalytical session, everything would have been all right.' 'Realist, that means consciously influenced by reality, and consciously influencing reality... the techniques of Joyce and Doblin are not simply waste products; if one eliminates their influence, instead of modifying it, one ends up merely with the influence of the epigones, such as the Hemingways. The works of Joyce

and Doblin betray, in the largest sense, the world-historical contradictions into which the forces of production have fallen vis a vis the relations of production. In the works, productive forces are represented to a certain degree. Socialist writers particularly can learn valuable, highly developed technical means (Elemente) from these documents of hopelessness (Ausweglosigkeit). They see the way out.' 'Perhaps our readers might just not feel that they've been given the key to events when they, seduced by many wiles (Kiinste) merely take part in (beteiligen) the soulful emotions of the heroes.' Berthold Brecht, *Über den Realismus, 1938-1940*, Suhrkamp Gesammelte Werke (my translation).

Brecht also, of course, wavered from the above views more often than not; though he fought against the formalist notions of Realism which the social(ist) realists conveniently sidetracked, he also wrote often of a 'Realism directly from the standpoint of a class, unfolding the ruling viewpoints as the viewpoints of the ruling, and ... representing reality, the way it is' (die Realität wiedergeben). Brecht's usage of the word representation, of modification, will not be questioned at this point. Correct class position and representation were linked for B.B. For certain film-makers currently working, this is not only not a necessary link, it is a vital weak link. The whole platform between two ideological camps within film production rests, finally, on this opposition; it is the overdetermining aspect. The anti-illusionist project is determined, or not, at this juncture.

8. 'Stella's emotional and critical reaction at this time against what he considered rhetorical in the Abstract-Expressionist posture was more marked than the gradual mutation of his style suggests. "I think I had been badly affected by what could be called the romance of Abstract-Expressionism,- Stella recalls, "particularly as it filtered out to places like Princeton and around the country, which was the idea of the artist as a terrifically sensitive, everchanging, ever-ambitious person particularly as described in magazines like Art News and Arts, which I read religiously. It began to be kind of obvious and... terrible, and you began to see through it... I began to feel very strongly about finding a way that wasn't so wrapped up in the hullabaloo, or a way of working that you couldn't write about... something that was stable, in a sense, something that wasn't constantly a record of your sensitivity, a record of flux." (Frank Stella, by William Rubin, MOMA, New York.)

"I always get into arguments," he reported, "with people who want to retain the 'old values' in painting - the humanistic' values that they always find on the canvas. If you pin them down, they always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen is there... If the painting were lean enough, accurate enough, or right enough, you would just be able to look at it. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion... What you see is what you

see." (Ibid.) I quote the above with full awareness that the statements broaden the parameters and raise as many confusions as they attempt to close up, yet in relation to the problematical, humanistic, ideology of process, Stella was more aware than most. And this his painting at its best is also clear on.'

9. Michel Foucault in 'On the Subversion of Knowledge', in the interviews with Gilles Deleuze and Paulo Caruso, is particularly illuminating. (Hanser paperback.)
10. For a beginning though also insufficient piece of work on the above mentioned, see my Beckett & Others & Art: A System (Studio International, November 1974, pp 183-187).
11. Reflexiveness can be as much a diversionary tactic from the anti-illusionist project, as anything. Similarly, the concept of subversion, i.e. subverting the codes, subverting the meaning, is merely a rationalised annexation of precisely those codes and meanings, with attendant guilt contributing the enormous libidinous energy necessary for this repressive operation. The bourgeois academic cine-semiotician's simplistic usage of psychoanalysis is a ruse.
12. The self posited here is situated in its self-alienation/distanciation, though this still refers to the concept, which must be fought, of self as centre (distanced though it be), self as unitary. This psychological centering of the self must be nullified in order to even begin to set up a concept of a dialectically posited distanciated self. Merely to drop the usage of a word such as self does not fulfil the requirement of redefining the word. And the redefining must be done so that self is understood, not to be a unitary centre of knowledge, an 'I' through which the world is. For the 'I' does not form the world. Consciousness does not form the world. Material relations form the 'I'. The self is merely a clinical word for a cipher.
13. Thomas Neumann, Sozialgeschichte der Photographie, Luchterhaflid 1966.
14. The reactionary basis of most American film-making has only been clarified recently, and this through only the beginnings of analyses which work upon the mystificatory and individualist aesthetics (ethics) of that movement. The English problematic, as I've stated, is a pseudo-documentary production which does not question itself. (See 'On Mike Dunford's Still Life With Pear' in '5th Knokke Experimental Film Festival' in Studio International, March 1975, p. 138.) 'The European film-makers certainly made a much stronger impression though without the presence of clearly established masters. But that's a way of thinking which many of the Europeans reject ... It's difficult to pin down, but one senses an attitude towards film-making not as the production of certain great works but as

an on-going motive of artistic work... European film-makers are wary of the structure and ideology which might create the conditions for cultural imperialism in the area of film-making. They are, therefore, involved in a redefinition of the nature and function of film-making that differs from those of the Americans who are making their way gradually toward the centre of our own culture.' P. A. Sitney, talking with Annette Michelson, 'A Conversation on Knokke and the Independent Film-maker', Artforum, May 1975.

The spectre of romantic illusionism and mystique of the individual artist is the reactionary concept of artist as god, artist as magician, artist as purveyor of beauty, artist as fascist.

(a) The Film-maker. The film-maker makes the film. It is a source of constant frustration that the illusion is so rigidly upheld that the film-maker produces not (only) the film but him/herself in it. Reception of the film ought to be productive, relational, not consumptive of the invisibly visible artist's character/persona. Even if Peter Gidal films dark rooms what does it say about me except what it says about itself, i.e. handheld consistency and repetitiveness presents procedures on to 'subject matter', dehierarchalising it, presenting its arbitrariness as against an essentialness; meaning is (ideologically) produced, not innate. Not a centreframe steadyfocus annexation; constitution/deconstruction, deconstruction/constitution of image through lightness blackness, and annihilation as well through extremes of such ... The film-maker is specifically not produced in the film, if the film operates on a materialist anti-illusionist level, functioning as a practice - film not literature, dealing with illusionism, not inside it. Films that end up being adequate documentaries about the artist (subject's) concerns transparently posit themselves against anti-illusionist cinema.

(b) Illusion. A constant illusionist/anti-illusionist procedural operation is not the same as a positing of illusion and questioning its 'reality' in the 'next' shot. True deconstruction (for which the term is not usable) is simultaneous with construction and vice versa.

(c) Narrative. Narrative is indeed a strategic category in the investigation of illusion-systems, systems of representation, in the process of representation; but filmically this study involves suspension of disbelief. It is this aspect, which is a central base for the whole narrativity-investigation, which is most consistently repressed. This repression overdetermines the whole 'study' of the codes of narrativity, and exposes its essentially reactionary state.

15. I thank Peter Wollen for having brought the issue up in the first place in the interview. I must add that my diatribe is not meant to imply that I subscribe either to Mulvey/Wollen's film or to their views.

I would be untruthful if I did not admit to a wish to have the Journal of the Society for Education in Film and Television deal seriously with current film practice, avant-garde film. The editors do, after all, attempt a Marxist film theory; and, yes, important translations have been published. But anger seems justified when Screen's policies and writings are not just ignoring and ignorant, so far, of current film practice in Britain, but in fact extremely aggressive towards it: by innuendo, omission, condescension and concentration on the narrative cinema, thus to some degree sustaining its dominance, at least theoretically. Actual power over the cinema-goer none of us has at this stage. It would have been useful in the past if there had been some critical work done; the film-makers also would have found themselves reflecting on their practice to a greater degree. Which can't be bad.

Peter Gidal

Structural Film Anthology

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