

Nina Danino

“Experimental film and video in Britain in the 80s.”

By the late 70s structural film as the dominant avant-garde film practice - which in Britain, had developed around the London Film-maker's Co-op - was subjected to different pressures¹. These pressures led to an explosion of different positions and aesthetics which displaced the signifier which structural film privileged as a modernist art for a greater emphasis on the signified. Content - sometimes in excess - and traces of structural film fed and an attack on structural film created a diverse and fragmented range of strategies, representations and aesthetics in experimental film and video in the 80s, new voices were heard and new positions articulated which challenged the aesthetic and theoretical avant-garde of structural film in Britain which connected to the experiments in film of the avant-garde in Europe such as Man Ray, Bunuel etc., and of the Soviet filmmakers in the 20s and 30s. The English structural film-makers of 60s were influenced by these early European artists and by the American structural film makers where the avant-garde shifted in the 40s initiated by the films of Maya Deren.

This is a brief overview of the challenge to this avant-garde in Britain in the 80s by a new intertextuality of strategies, positions and voices and to the aesthetic energy of the new mix. Some of these tendencies came to clearer fruition in the work produced in the following decade, hence some of the works by artists' film and video referred to are produced in the 90s as descendants of issues which arose in the 80s. Even though the move seems to be towards a convergence of medium and the creation of a hybrid culture of the moving image, it is important to point out that film and video developed as separate trajectories, histories and languages, until they begin to converge technically--but not necessarily politically--in the late 80s and 90s and now seem to have merged together in contemporary visual arts, where the moving image seems to be migrating into the gallery. The transition is one of a modernist practice to a post-modern aesthetic sensibility.

This paper cannot reflect fully the sophisticated theoretical resistance of structural film to dominant film practice and it would not be accurate to reduce structural film merely to a preoccupation with technical transparency - it also saw itself as a position of resistance to the dominant modes of communication, necessarily as a visual artisanal practice rather than an industrial film-making practice and therefore as a political avant-garde. *“I want to see a cinema that is in clear opposition to dominant film and TV culture. This new and radical cinema has been in evidence since the 50s but its roots are in modern art. These films draw more from painting, music and poetry. In all my films I have tried to give the spectator a positive and productive role”* (Malcolm Le Grice)

One of its key points of ideological attack and of engagement was concerned to reveal the ideological operation of the illusion of theatrical cinema by drawing attention to the apparatus as signifier i.e., the role of the camera, celluloid, “the frame, the strip of film, the grain and hue of the print stock. It often used superimposition of images and often included the ‘flaws’ that conventional film cut out eg., flare, scratches, the slippage of the film in the gate. Against storytelling as practiced by dominant cinema which draws from theatre rather than the visual arts and even against any form of representation, it eschewed humanistic content to perfect and concentrate its (masculine) control and mastery over the means of production, the implications and possibilities of the material and the perceptual limits of film as a total apparatus. The lens, light, the tripod, the printer, the screen etc. foregrounded rather than hidden. Sometimes these experiments led to works of transformative and unique aesthetic beauty such as *Berlin Horse* by Malcolm Le Grice, who together with Peter Gidal through their energetic writing became structural film's main exponents in Britain. The main thrust of this writing was theorised as strongly anti-narrative and anti-representational.

The aesthetic of Le Grice's *Berlin Horse* (1971) is owed entirely to the creation of the image in the film printer combined with a clear method or procedure. Here, these two combined with the use of colour, sound and rhythm produce a transformed image which leaves behind its base materials and becomes a visual experience of sumptuous opulence but always wedded to its production method. It's motif is the looping of the same piece of b/w footage of a horse (and a fragment of “The Burning Barn” by Hepworth 1900) which

is treated systematically under the printer using different coloured filters to create a colour saturated image. At the London Film-makers' Co-op film-makers had access to all the processes of film-making including printing, developing, editing. This access to the means of production was already a form of politicisation. It meant that experimentation was possible and accessible. The film-maker could control all the processes themselves. This enabled artists not just to reproduce but as Le Grice points out to transform images. In *Berlin Horse* this transformation process involves treating a b/w footage through a series of stages of superimpositions using negative and positive b/w, colour filters, negative and positive colour film stock to create a new heightened image. The horse is still the subject but the film-making process has become more important yet never denying the potential for visual pleasure. *Berlin Horse* was created for two screens but works equally on single screen. Artists were experimenting with forms of expanded cinema. Some expanded works such as Le Grice's *Horror Film* (1970) combined the a 'live performance' using the film-maker's own projected shadow on the screen and light projection as a 'live' event, these expanded works were shown in gallery spaces and used multi screen projection where the exhibition context and the spectator's encounter with the film was closer to the experience of contemporary installation than cinema form. Privileging optics over acoustic, music or narrativising sound was banned from structural film yet in *Berlin Horse*, the looping rhythm of the footage is edited to a memorable but striking repetitive soundtrack by the musician Brian Eno.

Lacking any other guiding principle of production, Procedure alone at its weakest produced a stylistic formalism which became formulaic and which could not transform the world or filmic perception but only trapped the operation further within the formal restrictions of the very apparatus it was seeking to engage with creatively. The American critic describes the formal characteristics of structural film in the following way: "*The structural film insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline. Four characteristics of Structural film are its fixed camera position (fixed from the viewer's perspective), the flicker effect, loop printing and re-photography off the screen*" (P.Adams Sitney (Visionary Film, NY: OUP 1974). Still, in its total project, structural film was preoccupied with using these formal strategies to uncover the manipulative ideology normally hidden by conventional cinema, not just the camera and its inscription but also projection and crucially to radicalise the role of the spectator.

The structural film drew the attention of the spectator to their own act of viewing and it showed the process of the film's own making rather than hiding it as in the conventional language of film. Procedure became important as a way to instigate reflexive strategies creating a conscious and not a passive viewer as an uncritical consumer of images. The pleasure gained by identification with content was replaced by the formal aspects of the medium as material, as something that the spectator had to work to 'produce' together with the film as an intrinsic part of the dialectic of the film's 'production'. This placed the viewer in a self-reflexive position in engagement with the film as an act of production, it placed emphasis on their own position of viewing and privileged perception or a politics of perception.

Peter Gidal, American film-maker based in London in his essay "Theory and Definition of Structural Materialist Film" (Structural Film Anthology, London: BFI 1976) added the word Materialist to the structural definition adding a theoretical and political dimension to a formalist or aesthetic project. For Gidal this project represented not just an aesthetic or formalist approach but a form of political resistance to all forms of representation and reproduction and the cinema is the one place where audiences are asked to become absorbed by dominant reproductions. Structural/Materialist film in this extreme form becomes a scourge against illusionism and content or representation of any kind.²

Against this lack of content or representation, women film-makers working within structural forms reacted against the assumed neutral but in fact, male homogeneity of a theory which neutralised difference and visibility to women as subjects.

The film-maker Lis Rhodes writing a statement of difference in the catalogue for *Film as Film* - an historically important exhibition of structural film held in 1979, from which the few women included withdrew in protest draws attention to the demand to work from a position which did not negate difference.

"Our problem was not to find an alternative thesis from that of "formalism" or "structuralism", or attempt to exclude women's work from this thesis, but to consider our own history. How do women need to

look at the work they do, the lives they lead? Can we be satisfied with token representation, a reference here and there in support of a theory of film history, which is not our own?" (Film as Film, Exhibition Catalogue, Hayward Gallery, London 1979)

Lis Rhodes' *Light Reading* (1978) marks a feminist statement and is at the split along gender lines of the avant-garde structural project. Subjectivity becomes the central driving force in the film as spoken by the voice of the film-maker in urgent rapid fire tones and a tentative narrative circulates and repeats with variation around a torn and fragmented image of a bed (possibly the scene of a crime). The female spectator can identify with the speaker of the text spoken in the third person 'she'. *Light Reading* combines subjective play with formal strategies; made entirely under the rostrum camera, the film-maker has total control over the materials. The rearrangement of still images under the camera give the impression of having been organised as a 'live' response of the film-maker to these images at the time of the shoot. Graphic black and white stills are repeated, the editing is fast, the images refer to the process of film-making - the tools of production are also displayed; the ruler and scissors, the animation rostrum camera, which are also a metaphor of constraint and imposed order. As well as introducing the subject and an elliptical narrative which inscribes the pronoun 'she', the film's own procedure of production is referenced on the soundtrack " *Total length four hundred and forty feet. Print next twenty head to tail*".

Stuart Marshall, video artist and writer identifies the importance of the women's movement to the shift away from modernism's concerns with self-reflexive practice and women's demand for representation and their own history in visual production; "*From the mid 70s onwards, a series of political cultural and aesthetic debates within video and film practice were to result in the rejection of the keystone of modernism - the refusal of representation - and the transformation of the modernist concern with reflexivity into post-modernist practice of deconstruction. This involved a shift away from the medium itself to its dominant practices of representation and the construction of oppositional practice. The Women's Movement provided a major political context for such oppositional practice, as feminist theory had tended to concentrate on issues of representation and the ideological effects upon women's consciousness of dominant media representations*". (Stuart Marshall, Video Installation in Britain - Early Years, 1983, Diverse Practices, ed., Julia Knight, University of Luton Press, 1996)

Peter Gidal's "Theory and Definition of Structural Materialist Film" imposed a taboo on any form of representation but especially the image of the woman, which is the most ideologically tainted image you can use in consumer culture. This had parallels in the debates by women working in film and video.

Two questions arose: Was the image of the woman so over determined by its history that it could not be used at all or could women confront that image directly, re appropriate it and to use it but within a critical context for the spectator? Could readings of that image be created which subverted its traditional exploitation in the culture? How could one confront the viewer's position and make spectatorship into a critical activity but one which did not deny gender? Perhaps falling into an over emphasis on signification, women video artists developed programmatic feminist strategies such as direct one to one address, the use of the voice, choosing the personal as subject matter and women's archetypal subject matter such as reproduction, the domestic, sexual disempowerment etc., undoing the power relations by looking back at the camera and confronting the spectator with their own look to show how respective positions are constructed, so that the work had to be read from the position of female spectatorship as a radical reversal of the norm.

The concerns of film-maker Nina Danino came at it from the perspective of absence, trying to create the space of the feeling of what is not able to be represented. In her film *First Memory* (1981) there is no direct representation of the woman yet the subject matter is an exploration of the feminine subject, speaking from this experience. In this case the feminine is abstracted and ungraspable as a construction yet also a tangible reality which does not necessarily conform to easy notions of empowerment through direct representation or didactic strategies although it is the filmic strategies which empower both the representation and the spectator. *First Memory* employs an elliptical and descriptive narrative which the spectator has to piece together in order to give shape to an emotional and a physical space. Slowly or at a slow pace, the film creates a sensual rhythm and dramatic tension which builds up a picture of a confined space and echoes the enclosed nature of the space in psychic and physical terms. *First Memory* evades

direct figuration there are no visible characters, actors, story and it resists psychological identification but it still creates a palpable sense of a heterogeneous subject which is as much created by the spectator in the act of viewing as drawn out by the film.

Taking aspects of a structural approach *First Memory* also depends for its tension on the use film as a material which measures out time, “*Film is a form of construction in time.... I found editing was a way of imposing a tension. The material was time made physical*” (Nina Danino *Filmwaves* 5, 1998). Images of objects and fragments of an interior are intercut with the black spacing which measures out film as duration. An important aspect was the use of the voice to evade objectification. The film-maker speaks in a controlled delivery which keeps out emotion, notions of characterisation and acted speech. The film goes against the ban on the voice from structural film which privileged optical mastery. Of course, with its archaic eroticism, it is out of the control of vision and for this reason in the dark of cinema it can be threatening in its intimacy. It is this evasion of the controlling power of the gaze that *First Memory* is situating. The voice cannot be easily objectified, it is both present but is inaccessible and it subverts the control of the gaze.

Through psychoanalysis and film theory ‘the gaze’ had been undone in particular by Laura Mulvey’s essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” first published in 1973 (Re-printed in, “Visual and Other Pleasures”, Macmillan Press, 1989)³.

Women working in film and video wanted to disrupt, question, dislodge the power of this ‘gaze’ within narrative forms and hidden in art. As described earlier feminist practices in film and video created strategies to subvert the hierarchical positions built into the position of man as bearer and woman as subject of the look i.e, as artist and model in traditional art (“Old Mistresses”, Griselda Pollock, Rosika Parker, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981). The body of the woman was always central to these debates, not as a neutral place but a place where gender and power relations are inscribed.

Amanda Holiday’s video **Manao Tuppapao (1991)** is a one minute critique of these power relations in Western painting. Centring on the image of one of the Melanesian girls that Gauguin painted for Western audiences as exotic and primitive creatures of desire. In these paintings the look of the women is usually shielded by hands or diverted. Often it is the back of the sitter’s head that we look at whilst her body is on display for our consumption. In this piece the model returns the look literally through animation and through the use of her personal experience as recited in an incantatory form on the soundtrack - in the shape of a poem. From the long ‘real time’ takes of early video art video editing become frame accurate. Here the still image is combined in fast edit with a real life model. The piece questions and confronts the supposed neutral position back to us as the colluding voyeur. *Manao Tuppapao* co-joins an aesthetic produced by the alignment of gender and black identity which was being explored by black film-makers through in the 80s when diverse voices began to be heard and facilitated by the Workshops funded by the new TV channel Ch4.

The important “Cultural Identities” conference (Commonwealth Institute, London 1987, Published in *Undercut* 17, Spring 1988) brought together for the first time theorists, practitioners, black and white film makers to show work and to debate issues of sexuality, gender, race, power and representation. One of the issues which black film-makers raised is how aesthetics is shaped by politics or how politics and aesthetics are linked. Black film-makers critiqued European master discourse and attempt to undo post-colonial discourse and install the possibility of a plurality of identities in British political and visual culture. Aesthetics is seen as aligned to politics, challenging accepted Eurocentric narratives of history and critiquing the images and social roles allowed to black people in a white culture.

The Nation’s Finest (1990) made by black video artist Keith Piper deals with the media depiction of the black athlete, as one of the limited celebratory spaces given to black men in the culture. The work places at its centre the black body placed in the context of nationality and nationhood. It examines and critiques this limitation of the black athlete as a site of prowess and ‘animal physicality’ and at the same time highlights the changes to what being British means. The emblematic use of the British flag appears with other footage of well known black British athletes. The central image is of a black male and black female athlete slowed down and poised at the start of a track event. “*The track and stadium become a series of*

metaphors to suggest an arena of spectatorship and voyeurism in which to view the black body. This space is like the cage of a controlled territory that keeps black people in their place as physical objects of desire. This is expressed textually in the piece through the constant repetition of the phrases, "enclosure", "holding pen" and "the natural order of things" (David. A. Bailey, A Directory of British Film and Video, Arts Council of England 1988)

This tape made in 1990 comes after the mass marketing of the domestic video in 1980s and 1984 when Apple launched its Mac Computer which triggered a multimedia revolution.

Television also began to take an interest in film and video artists. *Manao Tupapao* and *The Nation's Finest* were TV commissions. The former for a curated TV programme slot and the latter was installed as a video wall for the foyer of Granada TV. *Remembrance of Things Past* by John Maybury and "*Now I am Yours*" by Nina Danino were also both commissioned by Channel 4's Experimenta.

Now the hand crafted, painstakingly slow, artisanal work of *Berlin Horse* made in the printer or *Light Reading* under the rostrum camera could be instantly layered, sampled and manipulated. Graphics could be overlaid, the image could be slowed down easily and material taken off air. Stuart Marshall refers to the signifying practice of post modern video as having a quality of intertextuality "*which allows the work to be read in terms of its cultural and ideological resonances rather than (for its capacity to represent the consciousness of its author)"* ("In contrast to the reflexivity and lack of representation or meaning other than that which resulted from the formal play of signifiers in avant-garde film practice") (Stuart Marshall on British Video in 1983, *Diverse Practices*, ed., Julia Knight, University of Luton Press, 1996)

At the same time, the play of signifiers in *The Nation's Finest* point towards a graphic and more deterministic approach to the message. However, it still plays with these graphic possibilities in a way which is analytical and places the viewer in a critical position to the images shown.

The reaction against structural film's interdictions and the formalism of video art led to a counter position and an excess of the image. Artists such as John Maybury who gathered around the film-maker Derek Jarman, proposed a collective aesthetics which they called The New Romantics as an attack on modernist avant-garde as represented by structural film's formalism, launching an opulent, perhaps grotesque, counter aesthetic or style. They used low technology Super 8 and created a low-budget aesthetic, drawing on theatricality, props, costume, gay lifestyle, a gothic sensibility, the culture of clubs, music and TV.

The rise of youth and MTV culture, the music industry, intensified commodity culture and the availability of video post-production created a texture which emphasised the flow of images, game shows, short attention spans and the bricolage of images. High technology electronics enabled the mapping of images on each other creating new kinds of virtual 3D worlds and impossible spaces but its impossible artificiality also signed a highly self-conscious authorship. The Self is also deliberately created as artificial and theatrically cast as alienated in a TV world. "*The message was that ephemerality is human experience and that art does not have to be permanent*" (Sean Cubitt, *Populism and Difficulty - Television and Video Art*), *Diverse Practices*, ed., Julia Knight, University of Luton Press and Arts Council of England, 1996)

Artists worked with an overdose of images (eg Scratch video which used fast editing of off-air television material) and repetition in order to drain meaning and to point up the appropriative and all consuming nature of TV. This excess was not necessarily meant to celebrate the consumer culture and mass communication industries but to signal the collapse of the boundaries of self and meaning through over signification, perhaps leading to the collapse of meaning itself. However, does the collision/collusion between the superficial world of advertising and its glamour of images and the world of visual arts come too close, do its comfortable exhibition spaces within the heart of the mass communication industries i.e., as music promos and in music clubs weaken the potential disruptive power of the work?

High and low technologies were mixed to create a hybrid aesthetic. Sophisticated (and expensively inaccessible for the most part to low-budget practitioners) post-production editing suites created images of high production value combined with images produced by basic and low technology eg., Super 8 refilmed off a wall. Did this give rise to a new form of electronic beauty, a new aesthetic which is free from demand

for meaning. How did this aesthetics create new critical positions or did it with its emphasis on surface reproduce the factory of images as meaningless wallpaper creating anew a satiated and passive consumer?

John Maybury's **Remembrance of things Past (1993)** uses a hi-tech blending and layering of images taken from popular culture and the media to create a tableaux of separate scenes which are not woven together, some satirising the 3 minute attention span proposed by TV and satellite. The piece is a self-conscious post-modern fragmented text centred on the images and narcissism of gay culture but at its heart is a series of "talking-heads" which give personal testimonies of homosexual pathos in which resides the memory of painful personal human experience set against the hard surface of appearances and the world of TV images, which raises the piece above mere irony.

A different ecstatic delirium of the image and sound which reverberated from the 80s to the 90s can be found in "**Now I am Yours**" by **Nina Danino (1993)**. Filmed in around the high Baroque sculpture of Bernini's St. Teresa of Jesus in ecstasy, the hybrid surface of "*Now I am Yours*" unified by subject matter and sound, is in fact constructed in high technology post-production and uses material from different formats ranging from 16mm, blown up video with colour enhanced to create a shimmering image, slowed down video, Super 8 footage stretched and reworked, the dark glints, gilded opulence and reds of the baroque, cut side by side with the saturated colours of Super 8 of flowers in a bright sun all combined and transferred back to 16mm film. The film uses a network of images which cross and reference each other to create a network of signs within a driven compelling narrative around the possibility of expressing jouissance or an excess which cannot be contained or expressed within the logos of the word nor within the limits of a narrow metropolitan or consumer culture yet is bound by the limits of the body and subjectivity. The soundtrack combines, an insistent speaking voice track with performed pieces of stray words, cries which resemble a borderline state between speaking and utterance yet are always understood as 'performance' and not illustrating or standing in for the transgressive but enact a syntactical rhythm of movement and pressure between these two to create the voice of the film which can be disturbing in its struggle to say and reach.

In "*Now I am yours*" electronic post-production the image materials are fed into the edit suite, treated and reworked through the manipulation of the image creating new visual sensations - techniques of resuscitation (as the film-maker calls them) between 'life' and immobility of the central image. These manipulations do not allow the electronic to overcome the cinematic. Turbulence and the elemental force upon the image enters via this fragmented composition and the electronic but all are unified under the common narrative trajectory of the film.

These trajectories initiated in the 80s as an attack on or reaction against, the formal restrictions of structural film have not necessarily produced a new ideological position but a multiplicity of voices and aesthetics, however it is possible that a certain notion of what is experimental film also became familiar stemming from a tired dependence on visual formula, sometimes traceable to structural film, programmatic formalism and language of signification which overdepends on the limited repertoire of video art production and the centrality of content as personal subjectivity and experience. Duration seems to have been abandoned for shorter expanded pieces more suited to the gallery space and linearity has been replaced if not entirely by expanded work then at least expanded work has reentered the gallery space away from the frontal projection of cinema demanding or conceding a different time-relationship with the spectator in which spectacle plays a more controlling role. Narrative cinema and its history of 20th Century images seems to have become a source of appropriation and reference to many artists currently working in time-based art. The quote dominates aspects of time-based production. Meanwhile, the modernist avant-garde as expressed by the structural film movement has resurged fully incorporated and contextualised as being of historical interest as witnessed by programmes of American and British structural film programmed at established venues in London such as the Barbican and NFT. Is the notion of the avant-garde historically determined or can a new politically radical avant-garde emerge again in a post-modernist context ?

Footnotes

(1) These stemmed from the availability of portable video, an intensified commodity culture where the slow artisanal methods of the structural film-maker gave way to high speed accurate video editing and rapid flow of images sometimes drawn from the commercial media world of music and youth culture and facilitated by the new post production technologies, feminist demands for control the image of woman and representation, the breakup of spectatorship into specific interest groups and constituencies which acknowledged difference eg., race, gender, sexuality, and rejected the notion of the homogeneous viewer put forward by modernism, a return to the exploration of narrative, the introduction of the personal as valid subject matter for art and the preeminence of the subject and identity.

(2) Paradoxically Gidal's style of handheld camera, the obscure spaces in which his films take place - usually rooms, the abstract nature of the objects, the promise of representation never delivered, the low lighting and light pools which sometimes pick out particular inscrutable details and the grain of the film all create a kind of beautiful surface to the image and a kind of aesthetic.

(3) She used the classical Hollywood cinema to present how in order to take pleasure in the narrative, the female spectator is constructed by the film's editing, action, plot etc., as a homogenised male viewer, in order to identify with the hero regardless of actual class, race, gender. (later she modifies this theory to take account of an oscillating position between male and female sexuality for the female spectator) . This and other theoretical work in psychoanalysis uncovered the operation of the look within conventional narrative film.